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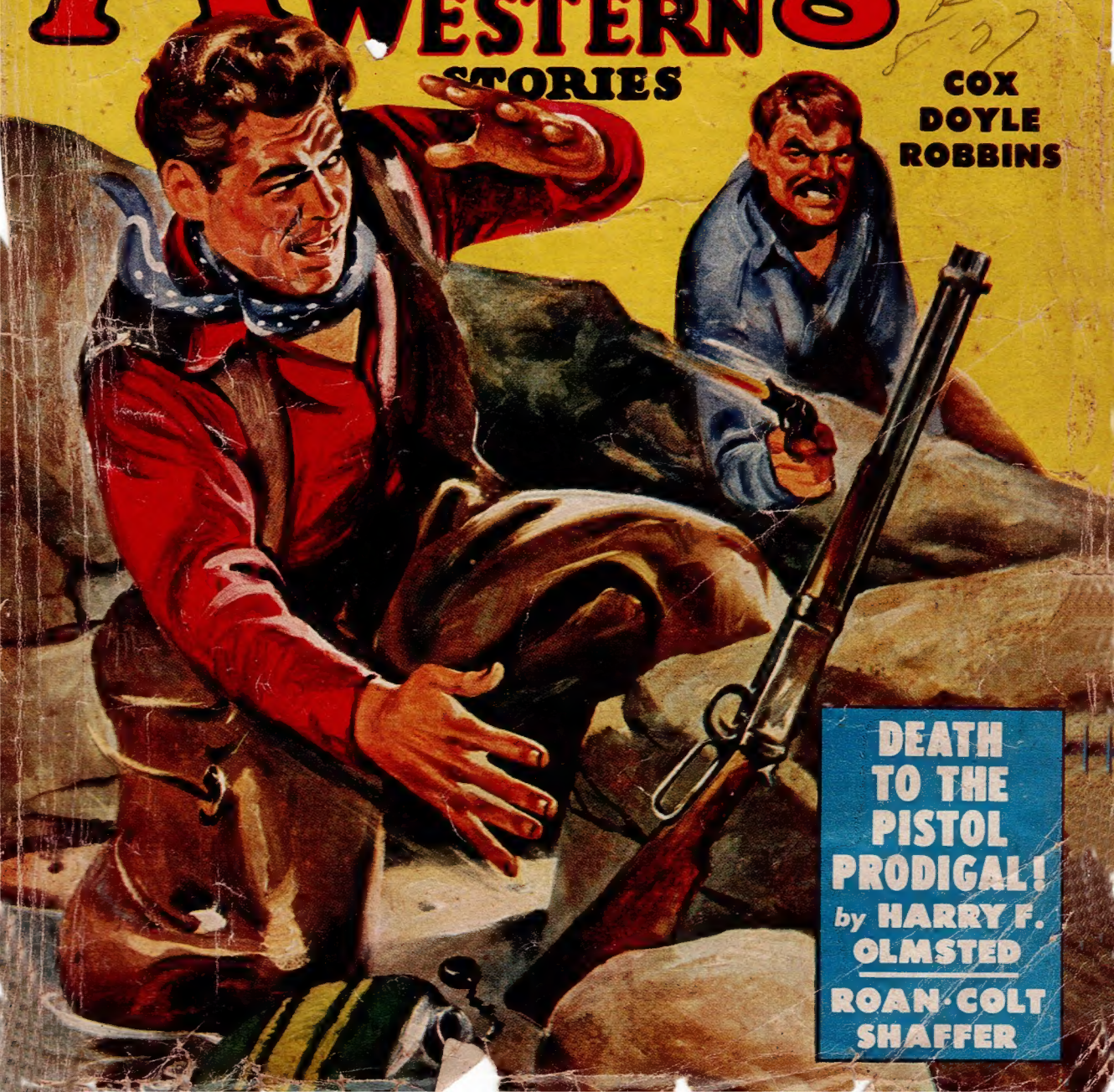

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by HARRY F. OLMSTED

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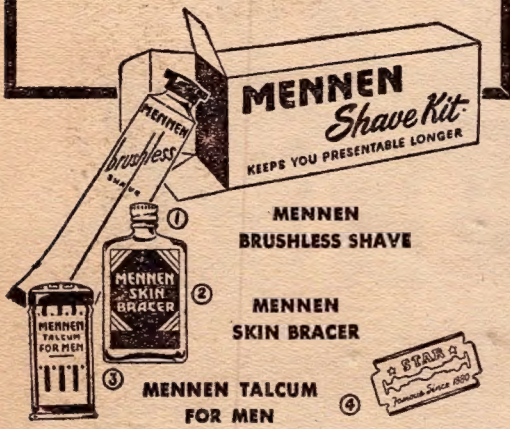

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The Strawboss

Editors' note: We have always been proud that our writers not only know the West, but that many of them have played an active role in its building. Harry F. Olmsted, an ex-civil engineer on western railroad and irrigation projects, and long a top-hand author of frontier fiction, writes us how "Death To The Pistol Prodigal!", which appears in this issue, came to be written.

Here is his letter:

THE trading post I describe in this yarn really existed and was notorious along the Overland Trail, between Fort Bowie and Fort Yuma. It was run by a Capt. Fred Grossman—a pioneer of stubborn courage. It took plenty of guts to locate such a post in the direct line of Apache raids against Pimas and Papagos, but Grossman took the chance and kept an uninterrupted flow of dry and bottled goods coming in, and there is no record of his heavily armed wagons ever having been attacked.

Being first of all a gambler, Grossman believed that having taken such chances, he was entitled to all the business that was to be had. There is a liklihood that his resort was not entirely ethical all of the time. He incurred the enmity of the Pima-Maricopa Agent who accused him of peddling whiskey to the Indians. Grossman maintained it all began when the Agent objected to paying for his liquor the same

(Continued on page 8)

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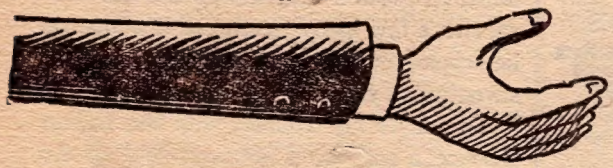

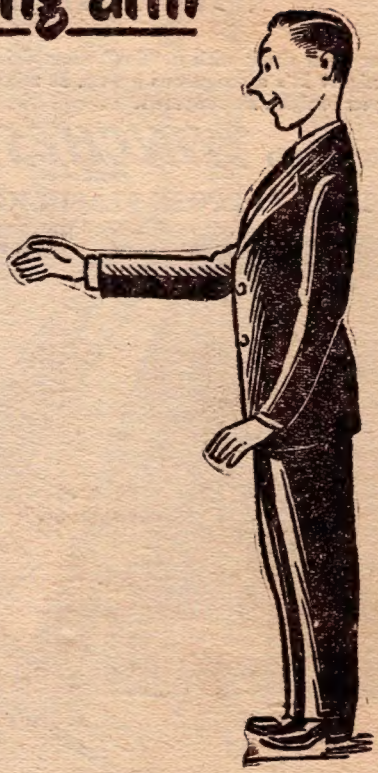

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FLASHLIGHTS AND BATTERIES

(Continued from page 6)

as anybody else. Time has dimmed the facts, just as it has erased all evidence that the post ever stood there. Only cinders are left now, a few rusted square-cut nails and—far back from the road near an irregular patch of manure-mulched ground that marks the old corral site, a few badly weathered headboards lie around, cut off by the swirling sands of seventy-five years.

To add to his troubles with the Indian Service, a scar-faced Mexican held up the place one night when a soldier patrol from Fort Goodwin relaxed at the bar and around the gambling tables. Maybe the houseman believed he could muster the necessary speed to gun down the Mex. Maybe he was cramped and was merely shifting position. He died too swiftly to explain. The stiffly cautious attitude of the soldiers set an example for the rest. The Mexican commanded help in sacking the loot and tieing it behind his saddle. With a polite: *"Gracias, senores. Adios"*, he rode south. The soldiers got their horses and took out after him, riding hard and checkerboarding the desert for miles. He couldn't possibly escape their dragnet, but he did. They found nothing of him, not so much as a track.

Some trooper started the idea that the Mexican was a houseman, employed by Grossman when his games were sustaining bad losses. That got back to Washington, in a routine army report. Placed back to back with the Indian Service complaints, it looked bad for Grossman. Uncle Sam frowned. Troopers seized a Grossman train of goods and he was charged with violating the Act of Intercourse (1834) and of dealing with the Indians without a government license. A prudent man faced by half such odds would have quit. But Grossman was a fighter. He hired a lawyer who later became a governor of Arizona. He fought the case through the

Supreme Court, maintaining that no license was needed inasmuch as he was off the reservation. Also, that he was innocent of violating the Intercourse Act because he was doing no business on the reservation. Discredited Pima witnesses hurt the government's case and wrecked the career of the vindictive agent.

Grossman won in every court, but the cost of litigation had sapped his resources. Morever, false reports originating in the military posts of Fort Bowie, Camp Goodwin, Fort Thomas and Fort Bayard, turned business away from Grossman's door. The crowning blow came when the post took fire one night and, fanned by a hot wind, burned to the ground. Set by his enemies at the Agency, according to Grossman. Set by Grossman himself, according to rumors in Tucson, to prevent recovery of stocks about to be seized by his creditors.

The wide West hid the trail of this man who had won with such fighting courage, and had lost so prosaically, who took his way from the Pima country unmourned and unsung. When the gulf winds blow, the skies weep on the site of the Grossman Post. Warm spring suns tint the graves of unmarked dead—the murdered houseman, two nameless Texas cowboys who duelled to the death, a wagon train bride accidentally killed while drawing a musket from the tailgate, others of whom nothing is known. Desert winds whisper their secrets to the sands that blow over the graves and coyotes howl as if in requiem. But the dead sleep fast and no haunting, sinister voices are heard here to discourage the passing of honest men.

As I cover the desert front, I find many a spot like this where I can sit a while and let the spirits of a dead past stir up yarns in my mind in place of the true stories now ground into the dust by the ruthlessly rolling wheels of the years.

—*Harry F. Olmsted*

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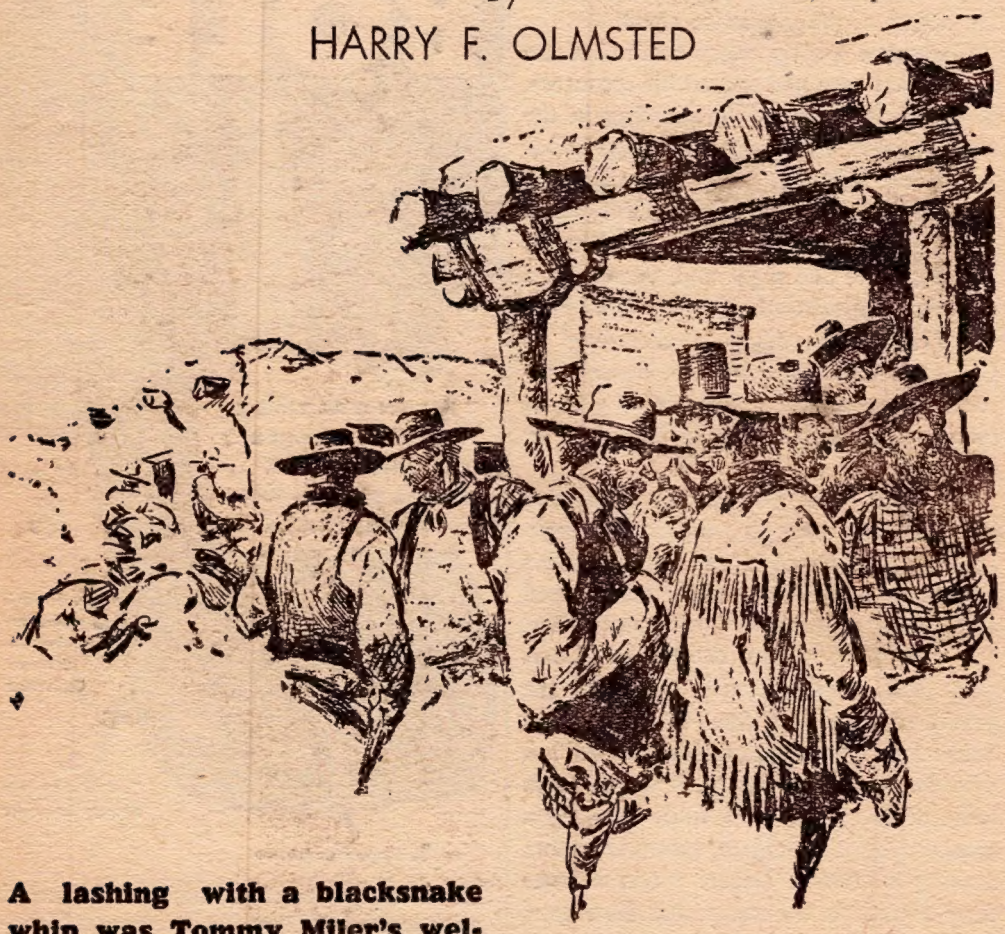
• DEATH TO THE

Powerful Novel of a Terror-Stampeded Range

By

HARRY F. OLMSTED



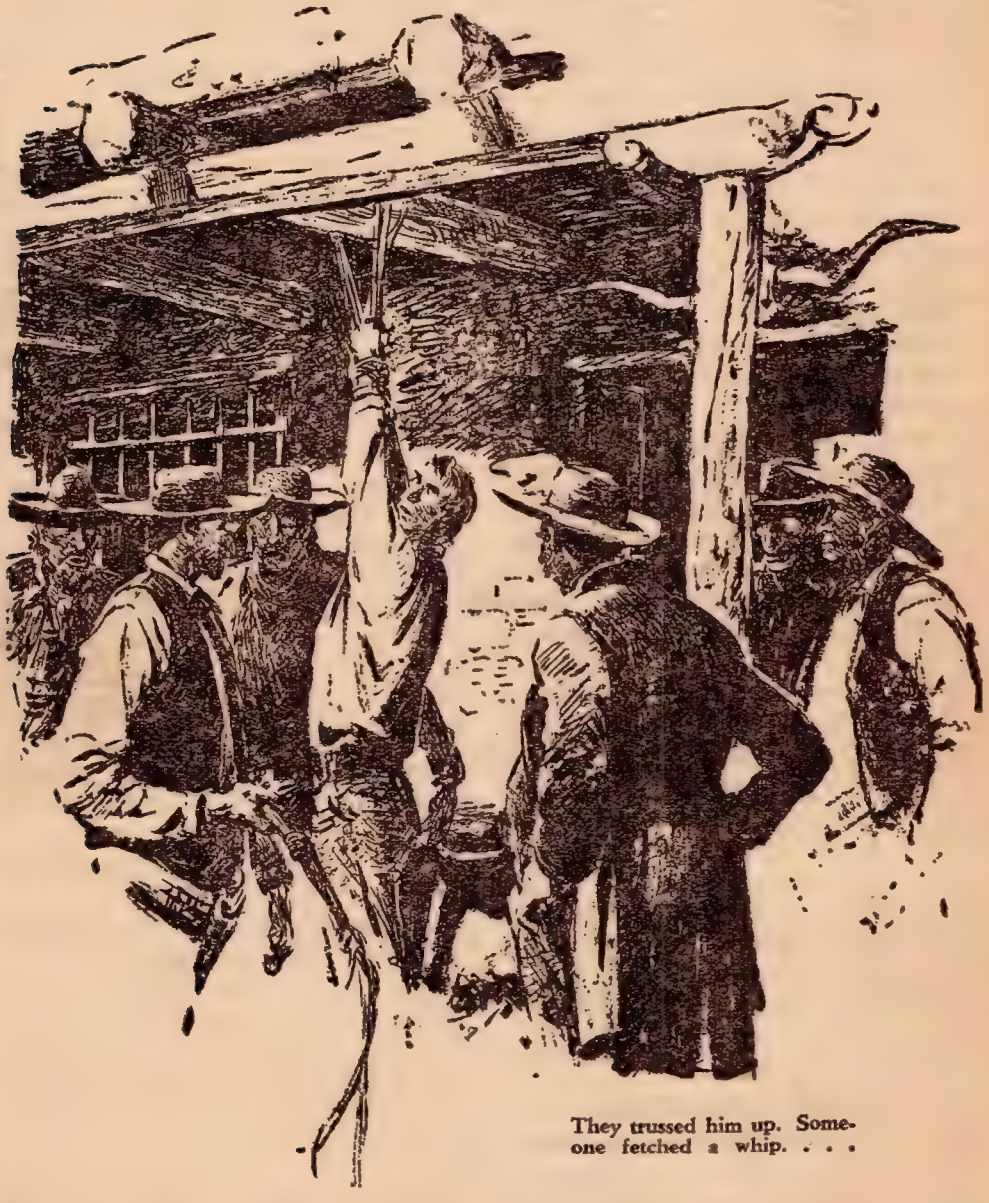
A lashing with a blacksnake whip was Tommy Miler's welcome home to Sahauro Crossing . . . where brave men like his once great-hearted sire now crawled, trembling and broken — a Legion of the Lost, that spoke in whispers, and cursed the dread name of The Roadrunner with their last, dying breath!

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Hell

TOMMY MILER came up through head-high *tornillo* with the fine familiar smells of river growth in his nostrils and the rolling calls of white-wing doves a deafening reminder that spring was full in the Gila bottoms. The

PISTOL PRODIGAL!



They trussed him up. Someone fetched a whip. . . .

trail was moist under his pony's hoofs and Sahuaro Crossing lay a little way ahead, its great cottonwoods shading the store, the saloon, the warehouse and the cabins of the Pima Indians.

Coming up along the California Trail from Tucson, old scenes had stirred his memory, and he asked himself what he'd find at his father's Sahuaro Crossing Post after a four year absence. Relaxed in the saddle, drinking in sights, sounds, smells of the great bosque he had called home,

Tommy let the pony make the pace, trying to recall Big Doan Goodnight as he had last seen him.

Big Doan Goodnight! Broad, towering, full of laughter and full of fight when crowded. Recklessly, courageously, he had opened a clearing where the wagons passed and built his store with the aid of wondering Pimas who came to trust and love him for his tolerance, his fairness in trade, his generosity when help was needed.

This mighty man was no real kin to Tommy. Years before, Pima hunters had brought Doan a terrified youngster, instead of taking him to the Pima Agency a few miles away. They had found a wagon on the desert, a man, woman and team dead of thirst within a hundred yards of a sweet-water spring. A feverish boy had fought them from the wagon till he fainted. When he awoke, it was to the kindness of a laughing, generous, affectionate giant who made him soon forget the horror.

Life flowed pleasantly at the post. Tommy hunted, fished and rode with Pima friends. Trading never palled. Passage of wagons was exciting. Then, sweeping away excitement, Doan sent the boy to school in Tucson, then to college, at far-off Austin, in Texas. It was four years since he had seen Doan, four years without explanation why he had never come home. For that reason and others, Tommy half dreaded the meeting.

The snorting of his pony brought Tommy from his reverie. Somewhere up ahead angry voices echoed. Tommy reined in, listening. Bitter curses. An angered cry. The crash of blows. Tommy spurred around a bend, saw two ponies standing head to head, saw two men struggling on the ground, slugging. Now a dark, wiry man pinned his grizzled adversary, raining bone-crushing blows to his face. Scorning recognized rules against interference, Tommy hit dirt, tore the tall man from his victim, and held him back.

"Choose me, Mister, not some glandered mosshorn."

"So?" The man shook him off, glaring, flicking dust from his dark clothes. "You're asking for some too, eh?" He swung savagely.

Tommy ducked, staggering as he caught the blow on his forehead. Pivoting, he rushed the man, pinwheeling blows. The tall man swerved gracefully, parrying, sidestepping, evading. Tommy had learned the army way. This man had served an apprenticeship, too, in a more scientific school. But Tommy, younger, service hardened, was undismayed.

Rushing again, Tommy took a blow that drew crimson from his nose and sent agony into his eyes. He heard the man's clipped laugh, clubbed at a taunting face and was felled by a jolt on the chin. He rolled as he fell, too slow to escape the swinging boot.

Jarred by the kick, Tommy caught the man's leg, dumped him, flopped astride him and pumped blows at his head. He stifled the man's struggles to break the grip, jerked him up, held him at arm's length, battering him. The man showed fright.

"You . . . you got me!" he croaked. "I give up!"

Tommy released him. A yell behind: "Look out! He's got a shiv!"

The tall man came leaping, his knife glittering. Tommy's arm lifted to fend the stroke, felt the bite of steel. The knife arm recoiled. The tall man's eyes were killer eyes. Tommy, trying to avoid the snarling, slashing attack, tripped in a rut, fell flat.

Tommy groped for the descending blade, knowing his chances were slim. Then something smashed that contorted face, driving it backward and down. Tommy came up, scrambling for the knife. The tall man lay unmoving, his face a bloody smear where the rock had struck.

"Danged tinhorn coyote figgered he'd beat me 'cause I wouldn't play his crooked game. He didn't know Uzal Pingree, the fangin' heely monster fum Bitter Crick. I—"

Tommy spun. "Uzal! I was so plumb busy I never. . . ."

THE wizened, bandy-legged oldster stared. His sparse hair was awry, one steely eye turning purple, blood trickling from lips and nostrils. "Yo're familiar, stranger," he muttered, "an' I reckon I orta know yuh, but—"

Tommy spoke his name.

"Tommy Miler . . . no! Shore are changed, son. Fum a beardless, ganglin' kid to a growed man built like a whiteoak slab. Too trustin' in a fight, though. Welcome home, Tommy!"

"Dad, Uzal? How is he?"

"Fair tuh middlin'. Failed some, an' worse off than if he'd run his shebang alone. When you stayed away, he put Jarv Chancery to runnin' the likker store an' gamblin'. One shore bad move, Tommy. Awful bad."

"Chancery?"

Pingree pointed to the man on the ground. "This bloody thing I just knocked bowlegged with a river boulder. Robbin' Big Doan blind, he is, though Goodnight wouldn't listen to his friends for a long time. I reckon he knows what he's got by the tail now, though. It's a question in his mind, I'd judge, how'n hell he kin turn loose."

"Turning loose or whatever," said Tommy, "I'm back to give dad what help I can, Uzal. How's the A-Bar-L Ranch? How's Abijah Ledyard, and that freckle-faced little female yellowjacket with the pigtails?"

Uzal Pingree, cowboy and horseman, like one of the Ledyard family since Abijah had settled here ten years before, chuckled. "Freckle-faced yeller jacket with pigtails, eh? Better start runnin', son, if ever she hears you call her that. She's the most beautiful female on the Heely now, I reckon, f'um Solomonsville tuh Yumy. A proper lady, to be talked soft to. Don't git gay an' hooraw her, I'm warnin' yuh. Tip yore hat an' show off yore city manners. I don't mind tellin' you, she speaks of you most numerous, with brave hopes of what a college eddication's did fer you. Well, I better—"

"Excuse me for eavesdropping, boys," said a voice, and as they turned in surprise a man came riding toward them from the river way, tall and straight in his McClellan. He wore a dark blue tunic with the silver bars of a captain, knee length boots, gray-blue pants, and black campaign hat with the crossed sabres of the Fighting Seventh above the brim.

He moved forward, reining in and smiling down at Tommy. "Hello, Pingree," he said pleasantly, without looking at the cowboy. "I've followed you all the way from the ranch. Wanted to learn why that beef hasn't been delivered to the quartermaster."

"Boys is pickin' it up an' hazin' it over today, Cap'n. If I'd knowed you was out, I'd uh stirred the boys up a few yestiday."

"It's all right, Pingree. Today will do. And you, young man, I watched you jump our peacefully-sleeping friend. You like to fight eh?"

Tommy grinned. "I can think of things I like better, sir. But fighting is another habit a man acquires in the cavalry."

"Cavalry?" The captain's brows lifted. "You've seen service, sir?"

"Three years, sir. Galloping Sixth."

"Col. Black Jack Sinsabaugh's outfit! Splendid! Where?"

"Camp Chuskai—Captain Haltam's Navajo Patrol. I'm Sergeant Thomas Miler, sir."

The captain's grip was hearty. "Pleased, Sergeant. I'm Captain McSween, C Troop, Fort Adobes Agency

liason. I judge you're out of service, but if you're ever inclined toward reenlistment. . . ."

"I liked my hitch, Captain, but my dad needed me in the store here and—"

"Your dad? Doan Goodnight?"

Tommy nodded. "After four years away, I've lots to make up to him."

The officer beamed. "I've heard Doan speak about you, Miler. You came opportunly." He studied. "If anything happens, remember I can use you. And promise you more stripes than you wore in the Sixth. I'll see you at the store." He saluted, flung a reminder at Uzal about the beef, and galloped away. On the ground, Chancery was moaning, coming out of it. Uzal hunkered beside him, waggling a finger.

"Sarves ye right, Jarv, beatin' on a old man an' playin' greaser with a shiv. Shame on ye. But no hard feelin's, feller. Tell 'em yore hawss kicked ye. Or stay ugly an' we'll tangle again. Bygones is up to you, Jarv."

Uzal straightened, rose to his saddle. Tommy rode with him to the post. Uzal took the ford, heading toward the A-Bar-L. Tommy turned toward the squat post adobes.

TOMMY dismounted, racked his pony at the gnawed wall, unthonged his saddleroll and strode to the store entrance. Pimas, lazing there, showed brief interest then drowsed again as the screened door banged behind him. The cool, dim interior was unchanged, the blending smells of flour, calico and coal-oil like friendly handclasps. Long shelves sagged with bolt goods, Ely's wire cartridges, blankets, tinware and Yankee notions. How often Tommy had stocked them!

It was pleasant, soothingly quiet, yet Tommy was nervous as he floored his roll and moved toward the broad man bent over a corner desk. Grinning Pima children passed him, headed outside with striped candy sticks. The native clerk at the candy counter said, "What can I get you, sir?" Tommy was pleased. He had taught Johnny Bowlegs English and courtesy. He gestured toward Big Doan and passed unrecognized by the Pima he had grown up with.

Pausing behind Doan, Tommy said, "Hi, Dad," softly. Goodnight stiffened, swiveled and came up. His lips made the word, "Son!", but no emotion showed, and in the word was doubt, fear, hope.

"I feared, Tommy, I'd never see you again."

"I know, Dad." Tommy put fervency into his grip. "I treated you rotten." Doan had aged. The ruddy, beaming face of old was seamed, pinched, sallow. His bushy hair was graying. Tommy wondered if Doan's booming laugh was forever stilled. "I should have written oftener, but. . . ."

Forgiveness tightened Doan's pressure on Tommy's shoulder. "College was good to you, son. It pulled you toward the sky, broadened your bones. I'm thinking that a fellow with a college degree won't find the Crossing to his liking. I won't blame you if—"

"I've a confession, Dad," broke in Tommy. "After a year, I couldn't see where a degree would help a man succeed in the desert. "I quit an. . . ."

"I wondered where you'd gone, son." Doan seemed unmoved. "The college wrote you were not enrolled. I assumed you were struggling, too proud to write till you'd made good. I tried to be patient.

"The army's hard, Dad. No writing materials. Very little fatigue."

"Army?" Now Doan was surprised.

"Galloping Sixth, in the Navajo country. I'm really not an ingrate, Dad. When I heard you were in trouble, I came home. Tell me; what are they doing to you?"

The trader blinked. "They? Who,

son? What are you talking about?"

"You tell me. Anybody making trouble? Jarv Chancery, maybe?"

Doan forced a careless smile. "Nonsense. When I opened the saloon, I put Jarv in charge. He did so well, I made him a partner."

"Then," scowled Tommy, "I'd better ride out." He told of his fight with Chancery and of him and Uzal leaving the gambler in the road. He saw shadows in Doan's eyes, saw his lips press flat and tight. When he spoke, his voice was strained.

"Let's have no more talk about you leaving, son. Unless you wish it that way, of course. I'm sorry your homecoming had to be marred by a scuffle with Jarv. He's hot-tempered, violent, but—"

He paused, hearkening to blatant voices uplifted in anger in the saloon—a separate adobe building against the store's south wall. Someone was shouting, cursing, and Big Doan's face contorted. "Biggest mistake I ever made, Tommy—that saloon. Set here almost on the reservation line, my whiskey somehow gets to the Pimas. It's cost me the friendship of the Agency people and the officers at Fort Adobes. They—they look on me as a common bootlegger. Before long a showdown. . . ."

It seemed he was about to unburden himself. But suddenly his jaw clamped shut and he dropped into his chair, swiveling to face the desk and clawing hit-or-miss for papers in an attempt to appear busy. Loud talk had come along the portico and into the store. The door banged shut. Heavy bootsteps slogged over the flagstone floor. A whiskey-roughened voice snarled, "Whar's that Big Doan gent? Thar he is, figgerin' out the profits he's made on his Injun likker. C'mon, Elsie. We'll see what he knows about this. It'll do him a heap uh good to sweat a little bit, or my name ain't Gord Gilean."

TOMMY didn't turn. He was too taken with the actions of his foster-father, too astonished, unbelieving. This great fighting man was afraid—abjectedly afraid. It showed in the tremble of his big hands, in the pallor of his face, but mostly in his weak attempt to appear too busy to notice the disturbance.

The steps were nearing. Gilean's voice was echoing again. "Git up outa that, Goodnight! My friend Jarv jest staggered into the saloon bleedin' an' beat all to hell! He 'lows you hired A-Bar-L to work on him."

Goodnight swiveled. "No, Gord. That's not true!"

"Don't you lie to me, you money-grubbin' skunk." Gilean planted himself there, beside Tommy's elbow, glaring down at the trader. "You know A-Bar-L wouldn't stick their bills into this manure pile without they had a axe tuh grind."

Tommy, still in the grip of disillusion, turned to face Gilean. The man was rotund, powerfully muscled. His bulbous nose was whiskey veined, his thick lips pendulous, smiling crookedly. He smelled strongly of horse, sweat and booze. The man lurking behind him was tall, lank, dark-skinned as a Mexican. Both wore guns and knives.

Anger touched Tommy. "Are you deaf? You heard what he said."

"Yeah?" Gord Gilean's inflamed eyes sought Tommy. "Who the hell are you?"

Fully relaxed, Tommy laughed at him. "I'm the gent who made the mincemeat of Jarv's face. Without being sicced on by Goodnight or A-Bar-L, either. Any more questions?" He halfway expected Big Doan to chip in with the information that this was his son and due to toss around considerable weight in the store. But the trader held silent.

Gord Gilean sneered. "Picking on a skinny gamblin' man who know no more of fightin' than a sow does about a side-saddle. But brother, that don't go with

me at all. I ain't no Jarv Chancery!

Suddenly he grabbed Tommy's arms, shoving as he whipped a swinging leg around behind. The sudden tripping effort was designed to pile Tommy onto the floor, but the man from the Galloping Sixth was expecting just such a move. He tensed, lunged forward, bringing his knee into Gord's paunchy middle. As the chunky man staggered, squalling like a cat, Tommy lifted a terrific uppercut against the drunken bully's chin. It lifted him off the floor, bore him back and down across a chair. It splintered under his weight, dropping him to the floor amid the wreckage. He lay there unmoving.

The terrific blow sent a wave of pain through Tommy's fist and he was rubbing it when the man called Elsie fell upon him, clubbing at his head with a swinging gun that dropped Tommy. His vision swam. Blind, desperate, he clutched Elsie's knees. A boot crashed into his face, slamming him backward.

Elsie lunged, cursing, slashing. Tommy scrambled, trying to fend the man off. Clawing to escape, Tommy's fingers found Gilean's still form . . . and his gun. With the wildness of murder in his dark eyes, Elsie clutched Tommy, gun-whipping him. Tommy jabbed with Gord's gun, triggered. Elsie stiffened, slipped to his knees. Vast surprise filled his eyes. "*Dios,*" he croaked. "You 'ave keel me, son . . . of . . . a . . . dog!" He collapsed, lay still.

Tommy rose warily, his vision clearing. He had seen or heard nothing from Doan. But there was Doan now, lifting a shocked face from Elsie's body. "Dead," he muttered. "Now there *will* be hell to pay."

"Who is this Elsie?" Tommy asked.

Goodnight glanced apprehensively about the store. Johnny Bowlegs had vanished. Only a tough was in sight, head stuck in the doorway, staring, then ducking out. "El Ciego," gulped Doan. "A hireling breed killer who rides with the Gila Kid."

Tommy filled his gun from Gord's loops. "I guess I'm bad medicine for you, Dad," he said, "but don't try to call me off. I'm going through with this."

CHAPTER TWO

Rope Doomed

IT WAS an hour and a half since big Gord Gilean had stirred, moaned and shakily found his feet. He looked at Elsie lying in his blood, shuddered and stumbled from the store. With him went all Doan's starch. He turned green, eyed Tommy mutely, and went out the rear to unload his breakfast. Afterward, he flung himself on his bed, lying like a drugged man.

Many times, in Navajoland, Tommy had seen the ravages of fear, feeling only contempt. But now he felt pity, begged Doan to turn his worries over to a son trained to handle them. "All of it," he finished, "you should give me the whole picture, Dad."

Doan gave no sign he heard. Tommy, watching the labored rise and fall of his chest, sensed the degradation of a once lusty fighting man gone soft and afraid. "Easy, Dad," he soothed. "We'll talk when you feel better." He went out into the store, where Johnny Bowlegs waited. The Pima was apologetic.

"Didn't know you, Tommy," he said. "You are changed. I wanted to help you, but I. . . ." He paused as Tommy gripped his hand.

"If I'd known them like you do, Johnny, I'd have shied too. Can you get boys to bury Elsie?"

"As soon as the boss comes into the store. . . ."

"Do it now, Johnny. I'll tend store. What ails dad?"

"Sick, maybe. The post doctor attends him sometimes, leaves medicine."

Tommy watched him leave, return with

Indian youths who carried Elsie out. Johnny cleaned up the blood and went out to supervise the burial. Tommy was alone. There was no trade. Tension rode the air. There was a rising uproar in the saloon. Men came and went. They were drinking with Jarv Chancery, building up courage. Tommy grinned, wondering what they were saying about him.

Growing noise in the saloon gave way to a sudden hush. Tommy moved to the door and saw them coming—a score of ugly-eyed, grim-lipped men, unsteady of foot, flourishing their drawn guns. Used to long odds, Tommy felt no dismay. These men were unschooled in attack against one unafraid to kill . . . or die. They were drunk and in poor fettle for a finish fight. He palmed Gord's pistol. "Well?" he asked coldly.

Gord Gilean, leading them, paused. "We want you, Miler! We kin stand bein' manhandled, but when it comes to murder, that's different. Our committee's tryin' you fer killin' Elsie!"

"That wasn't murder, Gilean, and you know it. Now, get out!"

Gilean's face darkened. "Take him, boys!" he roared.

Tommy laughed, barred the door. This store was a bulwark, built against raids by savage Apaches. He moved toward a barred window. A step echoed. He spun, gun jutting. Johnny Bowlegs stood in the doorway, his bland face unreadable. "Come in, Johnny, and shut the door. If we're to enjoy fireworks, you'll be safer here with food, water and guns."

He took Johnny's compliance for granted as Goodnight called from his chamber door. "Tommy, what do they want?"

"Want me, Dad. I'm locking them out till they sober up. Just a lot of whiskey excitement."

White, shaken, Goodnight stood in his doorway, staring at Johnny Bowlegs. Tommy heard the Pima's agonized cry, "Can't help it, Tommy", and the crash of steel against flesh. Pivoting, he saw Johnny fall and looked into the steady muzzle of Jarv Chancery's pistol.

The gambler was a sight, his face puffed, black and blue, nose broken and lips split, one eye completely closed.

"Up, you murdering blackguard!" he snarled. "Drop the gun! Quick, or I'll blow your guts out!"

"Jarv . . . please." Doan Goodnight's protest was servile.

"Shut up, Doan! Hunt your hole or I'll kill this boy." Chancery edged in for Tommy's dropped gun, pocketed it. "Now, turn around, Miler. Open the store, and no foolishness!"

Tommy had to obey, yet his every sense was keyed for a break that might turn the tables, a break Goodnight could make for him if only fear hadn't left him helpless. Disgust turned his pity to anger as he lifted the bar and opened the store.

WATCHING that mob file in, Tommy wondered what had happened to Doan. Where was the old courage? What made him apathetic, so afraid? Prodded by Chancery, Tommy moved behind the counter, facing the mob. Chancery rapped, "Order! Case of the People against Tommy Miler. Charge—the murder of Amado El Ciego. First witness, Marshal Gilean."

Gord Gilean stalked before them, grinning, swaggering, thumbs in his gunbelt as he called Horse Sorrell—a sleazy, rat-faced character who spun a well-rehearsed yarn of a good Samaritan shot to death while trying frantically to pull a friend from the hands of a killer.

Gilean then amplified Sorrell's story, confessing his own inability to cope with Tommy's brutal treatment, picturing his fall and the killing of El Ciego. Branding it premeditated murder, he called the trader.

Dull eyed, slow witted, Doan answered

in monosyllables, his voice weak and stumbling. When he finished his confused answers, a tawny-haired man shouted, "I move, President Chancery, that we find Goodnight's adopted kid guilty as charged an' string him up to the nearest cottonwood. Anybody votin' no on that?"

Nobody did. They roared an unanimous "Aye!" Then into the store stepped Abijah Ledyard, gray and eagle-eyed A-Bar-L owner, his daughter Lou Ann, and Captain McSween, from Fort Adobes.

Ledyard, stern, stiff and edgy, was exactly as Tommy recalled him. But Lou Ann was magically changed. Her pigtails had given way to a knotted auburn pile topped by a flattering pearl-gray Stetson. Her gangling, angular legginess had disappeared. Tommy, admiring the curvaceous figure she cut in her denims, found her glance seeking his, coolly questioning, willfully restrained.

Captain McSween, habituated to quick decision and direct action, strode straight to the bar of five-minute justice, faced Chancery. "May I ask the meaning of this business, sir?"

Chancery nodded, repeated the charges against Tommy, offering his own face and Gilean's jaw in evidence. Theatrically, he pictured the brutal, unnecessary murder of El Ciego. "We've organized a law, McSween," he proclaimed. "We've met in solemn conclave. We've deliberated, found Miler guilty and shall hang him without delay."

McSween reddened, fighting rage. He looked at Tommy. "Is this true, Miler?"

"No, sir. Ciego and Gilean attacked me. It was them or me."

"You see the ruckus, Doan?" called Ledyard. "What do you say?"

Goodnight, clinging to the door, shook his head wearily. "It . . . it's fuzzy, Ab. Tommy floored Gilean. I was looking down when the gun fired. I . . . I don't know."

"Look!" McSween crowded Chancery. "Your committe's just as illegal as your saloon. Complain to the fort. Miler will have military trial. If the facts warrant, he'll be bound over to the U. S. Marshal, in El Paso."

"Miler's guilty," Chancery snarled. "He hangs."

"Over my body, sir!" McSween swelled, unbuttoning his holster. "No ruffian—"

"No use, Captain," rapped Chancery. "You're outnumbered."

"You defy the United States Army?"

"I defy you, you straw-stuffed tunic. Boys, get him out of my hair."

They leaped on the captain, bore him to the floor. "I'll bust you ruffians," he raged. "I'll show you who runs—"

"Quiet!" rapped Gilean, "or I'll pistol your hard skull." He cut rope from the store spool, expertly fashioned the knots. "Seven loops fer a cuddle under Miler's left ear," he gloated. "Trot him out under a porch rafter, Jarv."

"Hold everything!" Ab Ledyard squinted over his Colt's. "Loose that boy or I'll blow you to Hell!"

"And I'll take his misses," clipped Lou Ann, her nickled revolver swinging.

Tommy knew the bluff would fail. Everyone else knew it too. That pair might kill before going down under the fusillade, but they could not force the issue. It was not fear of them but rather fear of A-Bar-L punchers and Fort Adobes troopers that hit the roughs. A cadaverous man with a hacking cough demanded silence.

"Gentlemen," he husked. "We are the law. Do not profane its dignity, or ours. The prisoner has violated a commandment of Jehovah. A hundred lashes should convince him of his error. The captain, Ab Ledyard and the lovely lady will surely cooperate. Cool heads, boys, and some mercy in our justice."

This was a drunkard called Judge

Lynch, squatter, disturbed lawyer and doomed lunger. Liquor only sharpened his judicial mien and ponderous logic. Men listened, finding in his suggestion a face-saving retreat. They hailed him, hustled Tommy outside, stripped off his coat, trussed him up till only his toes touched. Someone fetched a quirt.

Abijah Ledyard roared in to help Tommy. They blocked him. He clubbed a man down, was borne to the floor and disarmed. Moving to aid him, Captain McSween was battered and stopped. Lou Ann, rushing in with waving pistol, was tripped, rolled out of the melee. When she rose, weeping and disheveled, her gun was gone and her cheek bleeding.

There was no further interference. McSween limped to his horse and galloped toward the fort. Abijah and his daughter mounted and lit for their ranch and fighting cowboys.

GORD GILEAN swung, and the braided quirt whistled. Tommy flinched. His shirt broke the sting, and for a few hopeful moments he believed he could stand it. But a shirt's fragile under crackling leather. And Gilean was tireless.

Blood trickled down Tommy's sides and he steeled himself against the pain, determined not to cry out. Numbness succeeded that first red-hot agony, then the dullness of shock. Twilight dimmed his consciousness. Strange dreams danced to the *thud, thud, thud* of Gilean's strokes.

In time, the impact of the strokes fell, and Tommy was in a dark vale of misery, alone. His head tipped limply down. His last impression was of Doan Goodnight, peering out a window at him, making no effort to help him. Then came oblivion. . . .

From the floor of an inky darkness, Tommy returned to pain. Back, neck, shoulders and arms burned as from fire. Rough hands held him. Men carried him contemptuously, unmindful of his hurts. He heard voices, laughter. Then motion ceased and Tommy heard Chancery. "Over the bank with him, boys! They'll be here looking for him soon. When they find him, we want him useless as a witness. Now, one . . . two . . . three!"

They swung him, heaved. He hit the water, splashing, sank heavily. The cool river flow shocked the cobwebs from his brain. Dull though his thinking was, instinct told him they'd watch from the bank. Any struggle on his part would draw their fire.

Tommy rolled under, came up and gulped air. Down he went again, scraping the sandy bottom. Once he pushed to the surface for needed breath and then he was grounded, face to the blazing sun, prey to blood-sucking insects.

He tried to turn, claw his way out. But weakness held him in the clinging quicksand. He summoned unguessed strength and was struggling when the sound of splashing hoofbeat froze him.

Tommy held his breath, flattened. He heard a pony snort, a voice. "They throwed him in behind the post. Ain't water enough to carry him far."

"If we've passed him, Uzal," came the drawled answer, "he's in one uh them holes an' past our helpin'."

Uzal Pingree! Tommy's cry was only a gurgling in his throat. His terrible fear that they'd pass him died when Uzal rapped, "Thar he is! Yonder, lyin' on the sandbar. If them devils has beefed that boy, I'll—"

Tommy heard no more. Consciousness again deserted him. . . .

For the second time since the whipping, he came alive. But now he was in a soft bed. Flowered curtains billowed inward. Lou Ann and Uzal beamed at him over the end of the bed. Behind them stood a doctor in uniform, looking very sober as he jabbed a long finger at Tommy. "Behave yourself, Sergeant," he growled,

"and mind your nurse. If you're a good boy, I mayn't have to amputate. See you tomorrow."

He stalked out. Tommy's mind wrestled with that amputation thing, wondering if he was hurt that bad. He tried his arms, his legs. They worked all right. Mirth filled the room and Lou Ann was scolding as she laughed. "Shame, Uzal, laughing at a sick man." Then to Tommy, "Forgive us. You looked so comical, trying your limbs. If you knew Dr. Quinn like we do, you'd smile. Life's a joke to him and people fair target for his teasing."

"You're all right," said Uzal. "Get plenty of rest an' build yore strength before you trouble yore head about questions an' thoughts of battlin'."

Bluff Captain Quinn came regularly to the A-Bar-L, to rub healing unguents into Tommy's hurts, to joke, to minimize seriousness. Captain McSween, the Fort Adobes commandant, made several visits, reminding Tommy of waiting master sergeant's stripes, but saying nothing of the affair at the trading post and its aftermath. Tommy dared not ask.

EACH evening, Abijah Ledyard came in from roundup to sit with Tommy, talk about horses, cows, the rumored railroad projecting westward, and the drouth. When Tommy asked about his foster father, Ledyard adroitly parried, found sudden excuse for departing.

Tommy remained patient, eating Lou Ann's special dishes, enjoying her skill on the piano freighted in from far Virginia City. She dimmed his past, filled his present with beauty, tinted his dreams of the future.

When Tommy got up, Uzal fetched his pony from the post, accompanied him on his first ride. It was good to feel horseflesh under him again, to smell creosote, arrowweed and sun-baked earth. With returning strength came restlessness. Oftener now, he gazed across the river toward Sahuaro Crossing Post. Uzal noticed. "Worryin', son?"

"Worried about Dad, Uzal. I worshipped him, still could. What's wrong?"

Uzal shrugged. "Ever' man deserves a trial, Tommy, with all the evidence in." His jaw hardened. "He was all right till he cuddled that snake—Chancery. A-Bar-L kin do some right smart reptile stompin', but we dassent move till we're hurt and got some excuse."

"I'm hurt," said Tommy, icily. "Leave the move to me, Uzal."

Next afternoon, with Lou Ann and her father gone to Fort Adobes for supper with Captain McSween and wife, and Uzal wheeling supplies to the roundup crews, Tommy found himself alone at the A-Bar-L. At sundown, he got himself a snack from Lou Ann's kitchen, then saddled his horse and tried a hard gallop across the *malpais* mesa. Five miles at full tilt proved his pains to be gone, his strength unimpaired. Tomorrow, he'd thank Lou Ann and Ledyard and move out. His future was a shadowed thing, but one fact was plain. He must return to the Crossing . . . with a gun at his hip. Things needed cleaning up over there. Things that were nobody's business but his own.

On a brushy headland, he drew rein to watch a mustang stallion lead his mares to water. Sleek wildlings, they stepped light and wary, the stallion bugling warnings. Tommy thought they had scented him until he saw three riders converging upon a rent in the headland. One, a stranger to Tommy, followed the arroyo, his saddle manner awkward, unskilled. The others, hidden at first by trees, rode stirrup to stirrup in the easy fashion of trained horsemen. They were Jarv Chancery and Gord Gilean. Tommy watched them till they dismounted.

Picketing his pony under the rim, he eased through a hundred yards of mes-

quite to where he could see a small fire burning at the toe of the talus. The three men hunkered there, smoking, passing a bottle. Their words came plainly to Tommy.

"Don't blame me, dammit!" The bug-eyed, overfed man was angry. "I'm not Carter Blades' boss. He refused to come. Said he'd remain under cover. I don't like being a damned stool pigeon, boys. One slip and I'm ruined."

"You better like it, Ide," snapped Chancery, "as well as you like money. We need Carter Blades, and we'll respect his need of secrecy, understand? Tell him our next move is vital. Quit pouting now and listen good."

"I'm listening, Chancery. And I don't like your attitude."

"No? Chancery laughed, and Gilean echoed it. "Listen, my friend, you've grown so rich cheating Injuns, as Agent, you expect men to crawl to lick your boots shiny. Not me, fella. I've got you hooked. Lower your hackles and bridle your tongue."

"Go on." The Indian Agent sulked. "I'm listening."

"Tell Blades that Goodnight's wagon's rolling north on the Santa Cruz Road. They'll make Two Wells tonight, and I'll have poppy planted in their load. Blades' patrol will intercept the wagon and find the stuff in the boot. He'll convoy the outfit to the Crossing."

"A lot of damned risky bother, Jarv. Why not a bullet from the brush?"

"Tell the lieutenant," said Jarv, wickedly, "that I'll be there to persuade Goodnight to make the post over to me so I can handle his defense. If he refuses, Blades takes him to the fort for trial. If he's reasonable, I'll arrange bail. Then he'll be killed from ambush as he returns to the post. Of course, the mark of the Roadrunner will explain his sudden end."

Gord Gilean chortled. "Yo're smart, Jarv. Wouldn't Cap McSween bust a gut if he knowed you was the Roadrunner, with Lieutenant Blades yore right bower an' Agent Ide a respected member in good standin'."

"Shut up!" snapped Ide, testily.

"We can do without your speculation, Gord," chided Chancery. "Once more, Ide. I plant the stuff in the wagon boot. Blades escorts the wagon in and arrests Goodnight for smuggling. Then it's me and Big Doan. Got it? Good. Don't ball it up."

He and Gord mounted, rode into the gathering darkness. Gilean chuckling, Chancery cold-faced, deeply thoughtful. Sounds of their going died away. Lassiter Ide, pale, crushed, stared after them. He sighed, spat into the flame, drank from the bottle and hurled it from him. Then he lifted his bulk into the saddle and spurred toward the agency.

Tommy waited a few moments, then rode after Ide.

CHAPTER THREE

The Living Dead

A SCIMITAR moon adorned the western sky. Coyotes mourned on the hill adjoining Fort Adobes. Light streamed across Captain McSween's portico on Officer's Row, where Abijah Ledyard and Lou Ann took leave of their host who stood, arm about his lady, waving as the girl brought her Exmores about and tooled them toward the sentry gate. Following his wife, the captain closed the door, yawning. A moment later there was a knock. He opened the door and Tommy Miler stepped in.

"Pardon, Sir," he said. "I must talk with you."

"Certainly, Miler." McSween looked at his wife and when she had retired he motioned Tommy to a chair. "Now what's on your mind, my boy?"

Tommy sat meeting his probing glance.

"Still want a Sergeant-major, Sir? I want to enlist."

"Fine, fine." The captain beamed. "I'm pleased, Miler. In the morning. . . ."

"Morning's not soon enough, Captain. I must be sworn in now and I must be officially detailed."

McSween chilled. "Impossible. You're excited, Miler. Get some sleep and. . . ."

Tommy rose. "Sorry I troubled you, Captain." He moved doorward.

"Wait!" McSween leaped, drew him back. "What is this? What possible reason?"

Tommy sat and told him the cold facts, how time pressed, how much there was to do. "I must learn for sure who's after Dad, and why. I must keep that dope out of the Goodnight wagon and protect Doan when they strike at him. But that stink lizard—the Roadrunner—whose dope makes walking dead men of our youngsters, he's the army's meat, Captain. You've hunted him unsuccessfully and have face to save. When I brace him, I want the authority of the army behind me."

They talked it out till the captain's lady called out that it was three o'clock. McSween silenced her in the best military manner, muttered, "Most unusual, Miler," and made out the papers. He took Tommy's signature and oath, then wrote pass and authority for unlimited absence from base. "I may be sorry for this." He gripped Tommy's hand. "But until you fail me, I'll have confidence in you. The Roadrunner's made fools of my patrols. I've had adverse criticism. Also," his eyes burned fiercely, "there's the matter of Chancery and his men manhandling and defying me, at the Crossing. I hope you can get proof that Chancery is the Roadrunner. Good luck to you, Sergeant!"

Tommy gripped his hand, murmured thanks, saluted smartly and left the house. A few minutes later he was being passed by the sentry, walking toward the pony he had picketed before scaling the adobe stockade like an enemy spy. . . .

Tommy's horse was rested and full of grass and run. Tommy didn't spare him. He crossed the river without the cautious waste of time involved in making one of the proven fords. He was in trouble with quicksand for a few brief, moments, won through and spurred south across the bosque to the Santa Cruz Road. He approached the tall cottonwoods of Two Wells openly but without any reckless disregard of danger. Drivers and swampers of these big freight outfits went armed and, for the most part, were capable gunmen. Those who had neglected their trigger speed were underground, their lives and their cargoes forfeit to the ravaging Roadrunner.

Tommy knew he must have quick and ready answer for the challenge by the bedded wagon crew. Then there was the chance that he might run afoul of the renegade delegated to plant dope in the wagon boot. He approached slowly. He saw the bulk of the wagon looming on the campsite, heard the snorting of picketed horses. He opened his mouth to hail the camp, closed it with a snap as a pony whinnied off to his left and too deep in the timber to be one of the wagon broncs, unless one had strayed.

ALMOST instantly, a sleepy voice echoed from the bank of the spring stream. "Hey! Wake up, Cass!"

"Huh? Wassamatter?"

"Some horse a-neighin' to'rds the river Mebby one of ours."

"Criminee! Whyn't you go see. Do you have to wake me up if a bug crawls over yore tarp. Get up, damn it! Do somethin' fer a change."

Tommy lifted his horse hard to the left, flinging a warning. "Lie where you are, both of you, and you won't get hurt."

"Who's that?" rapped the buckskin

popper his voice shrill with fear.

"Sergeant Miler, U. S. Army. Lie still!"

Tommy heard the renegade moving off to his left, as he slashed through underbrush toward that tied horse. His gun was in his hand. His mind raced. Was this dope-planter alone? Would there be others awaiting him, where the pony had nickered? The odds were long in favor of the latter. It was a desperate risk, but Tommy took it.

The renegade was breaking down brush getting back to his horse, but it was a race he couldn't win. It was dark; the brush was thick and he was afoot. Again the man's pony neighed, immediately before Tommy, who made a running dismount, letting his bronc go where he willed.

The renegade's gun spoke, flame slashing at the running horse. Tommy prayed that the man's aim was bad, even as he let go at the flash of the weapon. Tommy was rolling, shifting position, fearful that there were others waiting. But no gun spurts sought him out, and it seemed that only one pony struggled to break loose, barely a rod away. Plainly, Chancery had sent but one man to plant the damning evidence in the Goodnight wagon. And that man was down, threshing, cursing hoarsely. "I'm done, shot all to hell. I'm dyin'. God, I don't wanta die!"

Tommy knew that whiskey voice. He still bore on his back the marks of that man's brutal lashing. He called, "You should have done your praying long ago, Gilean. If you're hit, only quick attention will save your life. I'll give you that mercy, but only if I hear your gun land over here. Throw it, far as you can. If you don't, I'll know you're playing possum and I'll start shooting."

"No! Here it goes!" The weapon slashed through underbrush, thudding against the earth. "I surrender. Git me patched up, Miler. I'm bleedin' to death!"

Tommy felt his way toward Gord Gilean, never forgetting the treachery of his stripe. Approaching silently, carefully, he fell upon the writhing man, felt him over for weapons and, finding none, called out, "All right, you wagon men! Come out here and make me a light."

They, too, were wary and it took minutes and several exchanges to lull their fears of a trap. Minutes during which Gord Gilean's moans and pleas grew weaker and weaker. The buckskinner covered Gilean. His swamper made a blaze. When light permitted, Tommy examined Gilean, found him belly hit and bleeding inwardly. "A medico might save you, Gilean," he said, "but we're too far away. At that, you'll only beat the Roadrunner across the dark river by a matter of hours."

Gord took it quietly, sustained by bitterness. "Damn that devil to hell," he husked, breathing hard. "He got me into this. I did his dirty work while he polished his fingernails. Gut shoot the dude, Miler. Leave him die slow . . . real slow."

"He'll hang, Gilean. You can count on that. But you're slipping, fella. Go out clean. Tell me—what was done to Doan? What has changed him so?"

Agony convulsed Gilean. When it passed, he was panting. "Doan?" His voice was a whisper. "He's a dopehead an'. . . ." He shuddered. His breath ran out gurglingly. His head lolled. Gord Gilean was dead.

The wagon men stared. "God," murmured the teamster. "Doan . . . with that damn—"

"Hard to prove he's with the Roadrunner, but it's probably so. Let's look in the wagon boot." He led them to the Schuttler, lifted a small, well tied package from the boot. "Opium," he explained. "The stuff that cracked Doan Goodnight, made him jail bait or maybe coffin freight. You boys can go back now. Fetch Gilean with you. You will be halted by soldiers,

searched. They'll find nothing. See you at the Crossing."

He whistled shrilly and his bronc came at a run. Tommy mounted, waved at the flabbergasted wagon men and rode into the waning night.

IN THE Crossing Saloon, a Pima woman was serving Jarv Chancery's breakfast when Hell-cat Hoban came from the barroom. The eyes of this gunman who subbed for Gilean, were poker blank and he smiled mirthlessly. Chancery looked up from his bacon, less curious than annoyed. "You deaf, Hoban? I told you to watch for Gord."

"Why?" purred the sly-talking renegade. "We both know now he'll not be back, don't we? Bet you five hundred Gord got it where his galluses crossed."

"That's a bet!" Chancery wiped his mouth. Then, noting Hoban's smirk, "Wait! You never bet on an unsure thing in your life. You never crossed guns without all the edge. I know you Hell-cat. You know something that I don't. Out with it!"

"Hunch, Jarv. Gord's stupid, but that wagon outfit's stupider. If Gord's down, he got it from one smarter than them . . . or us."

"You're talking riddles. What you getting at?"

"A friend of yours just showed up, one you'd uh bet lacked the nerve. He's got that—an' Gord's scalp, I'll betcha."

"Who?" Jarv got up, stalked to the window to study the racked red roan. "Tommy Miler," he breathed. "The fool did come back. Where'd he go, Hell-cat?"

"Walked into the store you didn't bother to lock when you tucked Big Doan into bed. How you reckon Tommy'll like what he finds in there?"

"What the hell do I care what he likes?" Jarv's face clouded and he choked his gun grip. . . .

Tommy, finding the store untended, walked into Doan's chamber, closed, musty with some cloying pungency. Doan lay under his blankets, his color pasty, his breathing labored. Tommy looked at him, his momentary disgust turning to pity. On a stand was a half bottle of whiskey; a vial of medicine with directions by Doctor Quinn, a soiled spoon and a half glass of water. Tommy smelled the bottles, caught that same musty reek. It made him wonder if Quinn was tied in with Blades, Agent Ide, and the Roadrunner. He tore the idea from his mind.

Doan Goodnight was drugged and Tommy couldn't waken him. Hearing Johnny Bowlegs enter the store, Tommy went to meet him. The Indian started, as if he saw a ghost. Then he was pumping Tommy's hand. "Glad you come, Tommy. Maybe you help boss' sickness. I think his medicine smells poison."

"Me too, Johnny. Get your pony. Ride to the fort for Doctor Quinn. Tell him I said it's urgent. Hurry back because I'll likely be needing you directly."

With the Pima gone, Tommy rummaged Goodnight's desk for paper, pen and ink, busied himself for an hour, writing. Finishing, he went for another look at Doan. Ragged breathing. Blue lips. He tried to recall the antidote for morphine. He was at the point of going next door to the saloon for whiskey when he heard Johnny ride up, with Doctor Quinn.

The medico came in with his little black bag, looking more the soldier than doctor. Concern was written on his face and his eyes recorded his joy at seeing Tommy. His hand came out and his tongue was loose at both ends.

"Tommy, boy! Or, more properly, Sergeant Major Miler. I am happy, my boy. The commandant told me the glad news this morning. Now about this call; I hope Doan hasn't taken a turn for the worse. He's got a tricky heart, Tommy, and. . . ."

For the moment Tommy forgot he was again in service and that this man was his superior officer. He shook off the medico's hand, caught him by the shoulders and thrust his face close to that of the surprised man.

"I want to ask you one question, Quinn," he hissed. If you're guilty, so help me God I'll kill you. Have you been giving Dad medicine with opium in it?"

Quinn stared. "Opium? Good Lord, Tommy, do I look like a madman? Goodnight's got a bad heart. I've been treating him for a couple of years. German extract of digitalin. What are you getting at?"

"Go look at him."

Quinn led the way to Goodnight's bedside, felt the trader's pulse, turned an eyelid back and shook his head. His face was troubled as he turned to Tommy. "He's drugged all right, no doubt about that. I don't—" He paused as Tommy handed him the medicine vial. He smelled it, tasted it, and rage built up in him. "Opium!" he gritted. "The only part of this that I gave him, Miler, is the vial. Somebody has switched medicines on him."

"Everybody else has noticed that Doan hasn't been himself for a long time now," said Tommy. "Everybody but you. How could you treat him for two years and not see that something was wrong?"

The medico looked crushed. "I did, Tommy, but never once suspected the truth. I've had trouble keeping Doan's spirits up. He's seemed despondent. I've been giving him iron, strychnine and alcohol. I . . . I've never seen him like this. He's my good friend, Tommy, and I'd never harm him, believe me."

Tommy did. He started at a voice from the doorway. "Hullo! Anything wrong?" It was Chancery, immaculate, his concern obvious behind screening cigarette smoke. Doc Quinn looked up from administering ammonia salts.

"Chancery! Fetch me some of your best whiskey . . . quickly."

"He's got half a quart of Valley Tan there, Doc. It's the best I've got."

The medico stood up face mottling. "Will you fetch that whiskey, Chancery, or must I impound your stock to get it? Valley Tan's fine—but only in a distillery package with the seal unbroken." When Chancery had shrugged and departed, he said, "He's the only man with motive, trust and opportunity to have done this."

"That's my idea, Doc. What about Dad? Is he bad?"

"His heart's struggling against enough opium to kill a horse." He was digging in his bag for a heart stimulant when Chancery returned. The man flushed when Quinn examined the bottle carefully, looked him up and down and broke the seal. As Quinn worked to get medicine down the unconscious man, Chancery came to Tommy.

"Why the fuss? Doan has these spells regular. Bad heart. Doc acts like I'm to blame for that."

"Aren't you?" Tommy was icily hostile. He swayed toward him, whispering, "Draw, Roadrunner! It'll save me unmasking you, and it's fitting you die beside Doan's bed. Draw, damn your crooked soul!"

Chancery stood tall, straight and pale, deadly hatred hooding his eyes. "I've killed men for calling me card cheat, Miler. How can I do less than kill you for linking me with a character I've fought bitterly." He turned, strode out.

"Any time, fella," called Tommy. "Any time!"

CHAPTER FOUR

War Clouds

LIFTED from the verge of the grave by Doc Quinn, Goodnight was lackluster, foggy. But he did recognize Tommy, who sat on the edge of the bed. He smiled, took his hand. "Sorry, son,"

he murmured. "Hope you never get a bad ticker. I reckon I'm dying."

"Not yet, Dad. Your heart's pretty strong, or you'd have died long ago. Chancery's been drugging you. Morphine! When it's out of your system, you'll be fine."

"Chancery . . . morphine?" Doan puzzled. "Oh, no. I've only taken Doc's drops and whiskey by the spoonful. Anyhow, Jarv ain't that kind."

"He doped your drops and your whiskey, Dad. You'll make a fight of it, but while you're down I'll need every boost. I've penned a paper vesting your interests in me."

"I won't sign it." Doan said flatly. "My will names you as my heir. If I die. . . ."

"You may, Dad, and soon. Or be taken to Fort Abodes guardhouse to rot later in some Federal pen. I mustn't worry you, but it's best you know the truth. Roadrunner's making a play for this trading post this afternoon."

"Roadrunner! Hogwash! You surely don't expect me to believe that!"

"Easy, Doan." The medico soothed him. "I'd believe the boy and I'd sign."

There's nothing quite so stubborn as a sick man who overestimates his power to reason logically. Doan Goodnight fought doggedly against letting the reins of management slip from his weakened fingers. At noon, Tommy made coffee and sandwiches. About one, Doan gave in, accepted Tommy's help in guiding his trembly fingers as he signed. Quinn then gave him a stiff bromide, put him to sleep.

"Now what?" The army doctor was grim. "I'm due at the fort at three o'clock."

"You go right along, Sir. Don't mind me. And thanks for everything."

A smile wreathed the medico's mouth. "You're alone, Miler. The Roadrunner can be depended upon for truth when he threatens an enemy. At three, I was supposed to fetch Captain McSweed word that you found the evidence and appropriated it. That can wait, I'd say."

Tommy grinned. "Yes . . . all around. If you feel you must roll lead pills instead of sugar coated ones, I'll send Johnny Bowlegs with word to the commandant."

"I'll appreciate that," sighed Quinn. "Life's been most dull lately." He laughed with Tommy, gripped his palm fervently. "With your permission, Sergeant, I'll borrow a rifle from the rack." He moved into the store. Tommy followed with word for Johnny.

Time snailed maddeningly. Heat bore down as it nearly always did, there in the bottoms. Tommy stretched out on the bench beneath the window. Flies buzzed. Sweat ran off his face. He got up, somehow annoyed by the tuneless little dirge Doc Quinn hummed as he worked with an oiled rag, to loosen the action of the new Winchester.

Tommy moved to a window at the far corner of the store, looking out at the saloon varandah, where a few Pimas drowsed the afternoon away. He saw the score or more of riders come flashing silently in on the soft silt roadway, swing off at the rack, tie their animals and troop into the saloon. These, he knew, were followers of the Roadrunner, robbers, killers.

Bold, heavily armed, keyed to violence, they were in the saloon now and the dust they had stirred was settling. And Tommy thought of Big Doan, his great strength brought down by these same men, and of the debt they owed. A debt with payment long overdue. Odds? Tommy recalled what Goodnight had said about odds once. Before he was a broken man, and a grateful boy hung on his words when he talked.

"All your life, son," he had said, his big hand on Tommy's shoulder, "you'll be faced by what look like overpowering odds. They're not really overpowering;

nothing is while a man keeps fear from his mind and fight in his heart. A man who won't be beaten can't be beaten. Always remember that when your moments get dark."

Tommy was still standing there, remembering, still annoyed by Doc's endless humming, when out of the road leading down to the river's edge came three riders. Lou Ann Ledyard, with her father and Uzal Pingree flanking her. Tommy voiced an audible protest. "By godfrey! If that ain't luck, having her show up at a time like this!"

"Safer than being alone at the ranch, Miler," said Quinn. He rocked the lever, tripped the hammer with evident satisfaction. "It's a time for friends to stick together, my boy, a time for folks to know for sure who their friends are." He resumed his humming.

TOMMY saw the three A-Bar-L people light down at the rack. He saw Chancery's face appear at the saloon window, a face dark with ugly passion, a face alight with something of pleasure too. Through half closed lids, the man watched Lou Ann lead Uzal and her dad to the store entrance. Then his glance shifted to the rider who came galloping up from the ford, standing in the stirrups of his McClellan, to dismount in military style, tie his horse and stride into the store. Captain McSween was smiling a little as he entered, and there was about him some subtle change from the easy going officer of a remote and unimportant post.

Ledyard grim and yet sly of eye—like one who entertains cunning secrets, was asking Doc Quinn about Big Doan, when the Fort Adobes commandant entered. Quinn put down his gun and saluted. McSween acknowledged it, muttered, "At ease," and with unfeigned concern added, "What about my friend, Goodnight, Doc? How is he?"

"Sleeping now, Sir. Critically ill but, I hope, not hopelessly so. You see, his heart has been. . . ." He went on, explaining Big Doan's condition to McSween and Abijah Ledyard. Uzal Pingree, a smile frozen on his weathered face, made the rounds of the windows, shifting a barrel of flour here, moving a sack of beans there. Lou Ann, spotting Tommy at the window on the saloon side, rounded the counter and came to him. He noticed that she wore a pistol, belted high on her hip.

"Maybe you wonder," she said, "why we happen here . . . just at this time."

Tommy knew then that A-Bar-L was sensitive about the intrusion, that Lou Ann was uttering sort of a left handed apology. He grinned at her, remembering days long past. Then she had been all tomboy, strong, agile and hard-headed as himself. Leader in many of their mischiefs. There was little of the tomboy left, he remarked, save the denims that revealed her womanly charms. She was strong, tall and dark, her hair burnished bronze.

"I suppose," he conjectured, "that Uzal has filled you and your dad with some wild idea about me needing protection from my father's partner."

"Then you do expect trouble? Captain McSween said—"

"Then the captain cut you in on this, eh? All right. It may get smoky. Smoky as Hell."

"Even that," she said, "would be welcome. We've gotten in a rut, Tommy. Always on the defensive, waiting for the Roadrunner to hit at the A-Bar-L. Nothing ever happening . . . to us. Denied the right to take after that renegade who kills and robs and smuggles and burns, making monkeys out of such law as we have. It will be a pleasure to fight with you, Tommy, and . . ." a gay little laugh fell over her parted lips, "maybe take up our arguments where we left off

when you left here to go to school."

He turned to look through the window, aroused by hoofbeats. Johnny Bowlegs came racing to the hitchbar, lit running.

"The wagon soon comes!" he called, sticking his head in the door. "There is a dead man roped on top and soldiers ride around it!"

The lumbering freight wagon, drawn by six sweat-streaked mules, emerged from the timber, rolled noisily across the small corduroy bridge spanning a stream, and turned toward the store. On the box, buckskin popper and swamper sat with their necks pulled in, their faces reflecting the tumult of their emotions. Atop the high load, blanket wrapped and rope lashed, rode the body of Gord Gilean. Outriding the outfit were seven troopers —three on each side, one behind. Leading the way, tickling his horse so as to make him prance prettily, was Lieutenant Carter Blades, with a color sergeant at his flank.

The lieutenant was a tall, iron-muscled man who didn't look his thirty years. A pleasant man to meet, he was basically unfriendly, his creed that of making his own way, and to hell with those trampled in his rush.

His uniform fitted him as though he were poured into it. He rode with the unaffected ease of one born to horse. There was a bold dash about him, even on routine patrol, that made disgruntled men admire to follow him. He tipped his service hat back a little as his eyes fell upon the post. His hand fell to the hilt of his sword and a faint smile edged his wide lips.

Within the store, silence was broken by Captain McSween's low growl. "Lieutenant Blades, escorting the wagon. Sergeant Miler, I thought you had taken care of that contraband."

"I did, Sir. What neither one of us figured on was the lieutenant being primed to supply any deficiency. He just have, unless he's a blind fool."

"Blades is no fool, Miler. All of you stay in here. I'm going out to receive the lieutenant's report." He squared his shoulders, strode stiffly across the store and out.

Tommy loosened his gun in its sheath. "Cover him from the far window, Uzal," he called. "I'll take this end." And to Lou Ann. "If there's trouble, don't take unnecessary chances."

OUTSIDE, the wagon rumbled up. The reins tightened. The brakes squealed. The sergeant barked a halt order and the troopers paused, saluting. Lieutenant Blades' sword came out with a clang, flashing to salute. "Captain, Sir. Lieutenant Blades reporting off patrol."

"Proceed, Lieutenant."

"Halted and searched a Goodnight wagon. Found and seized contraband. Discovered a murdered man hidden in the load, Sir. Placed driver and swamper under arrest and brought the outfit here."

"That's a damned lie!" rapped the swamper. "The body never was hid. It's been like you see it, Cap'n, since we loaded it."

McSween, coldly impersonal, lifted his hand to acknowledge the protest. "How is it that you searched this wagon, Lieutenant? I am sure your orders said nothing about search and seizure."

Blades flushed, cast a nervous, sideling glance as the saloon door disgorged at least a score of tough, heavily armed men. "I may have exceeded my orders, Captain, but I think you'll admit it was for good reasons. For a long time, I've been suspicious of Doan Goodnight. I happened to overhear his orders to a Mexican, one night, and since then—"

"And how does it happen, Lieutenant," broke in McSween, icily, "that you escorted your seizure to this trading post? It was shorter to the fort, where you should rightly have taken it."

"Sir, I wanted to take no chance of Goodnight hearing of the seizure and making his escape. I came to arrest him and also his son—Tommy Miler. The wagon men assert he murdered Gord Gilean in cold blood, as he hailed the camp at Two Wells."

"Another lie!" hollered the buck-skinner. "We never asserted no such thing. After snoopin' around our camp, plantin' dope in our wagon, Gilean was killed when he shot at Miler."

"You have the contraband, Lieutenant Blades?" asked the captain.

"Right here." Carter Blades handed him a package already ripped open. "It's opium, processed in Hong Kong."

"He claims he found it in our boot," complained the swamper. "If he did, he put it there. 'Cause there wasn't none in the boot before he looked; I'll swear to it."

"A dope smuggler's oath is worthless," said the lieutenant, coldly.

"While they're gabbing," shouted Hell-cat Hoban, from the saloon porch, "two of you get on the load and take Gord's body down. 'Tain't seemly to have it roastin' up yonder."

They climbed onto the load, loosening the lashings, handing down the blanketed corpse. Willing hands laid it in the awning shade and Hell-cat bared the gray face, cursing softly. Tommy was only vaguely aware of these things. He was searching the crowd at the saloon, failing to find Jarv Chancery there, wondering why.

"Doc," he called to Quinn, "if you'll take this window, I think I'll go on a hunt for Chancery. Maybe I should have thought of it sooner. He could be well out of our reach by now."

Doc came over, buoyed by the pull of excitement, still humming. Tommy left the window and he met Lou Ann's eyes where she sat on grain sacks, plainly disgusted with her uselessness. He smiled at her and she gave it back. Tommy followed the aisle behind the counter and was opposite the money drawer when the choked cry came from Goodnight's chamber.

The sound froze Tommy momentarily, then he was running. But fast as he was, he was not yet at the door when it opened and Johny Bowlegs came through. He looked at Tommy with a terrible soundless plea, closed his eyes and pitched down. Blood, like a fountain, spurted from the ghastly hole in his neck with each beat of his heart.

Tommy recognized the hurt as a knife wound, knew Johnny was doomed and didn't touch him as he sped past. "Doc!" he flung back. "Look after Johnny!" Then he was in Goodnight's room, gun leveled, questing for a target. He was too late. A pang hit him as he looked out the open door giving to the inner court. The double killer had vanished there, leaving Big Doan knifed to death behind him. Weak heart, doped drops, frustration, misery—these things would plague him no longer.

For a long minute, Tommy stood frozen in the presence of death, numbed by the belief he could have prevented this by staying with Doan instead of delegating the watch to Johnny Bowlegs. The bitter self-recriminations tormented him cruelly. He felt numb, yet his perceptions were razor keen. Over other sounds, he heard the back door of the saloon close softly. He heard Captain McSween say, "Lieutenant Blades will dismount and tender his sword. The patrol will conduct him to the Fort Adobes guardhouse, there to await court-martial. . . ."

Tommy heard the lieutenant's fierce interruption: "Like hell," with the lone shot following swiftly. Uzal Pingree, Tommy knew, had fired that shot, killing an officer about to murder a superior.

After that, all was pandemonium. Firing came from the saloon. Gun-bursts

answered from the store. From the direction of the ford, short, staccato trumpet bursts were blending with the yipping of cowboys and the nearing of hoofs. Posted troopers and A-Bar-L men had their signal to advance.

Tommy walked out the door and toward the saloon's rear door. He took slow steps, one after another. A small, chill smile was on his lips, his eyes were straight ahead.

TOMMY let himself into the saloon, threaded a narrow aisle in the barrel room, and let himself silently into the barroom. The front of the shadowed room swarmed with men, some banked near the door, others kneeling at the windows, all with bared guns. Shooting had died away. The lash of authority spoke from outside. "I demand your surrender. In five minutes we will attack. I have no desire to injure any innocent man who may be among you; neither can I judge your innocence or guilt. Surrender and face trial; those are our terms."

"To hell with your terms, you stuffed sack!" Chancery stood well back from the door, a gun in each hand, hatred on his face. "We'll dictate the terms, McSween. I've got twenty men in here, loaded to the eyes. I've forty men on the way. Pull out while you can. If you insist, I'll wipe you all out and it will go down as an uprising of the Pima Indians."

There was weight to his words and Tommy could hear McSween discussing it with Ledyard and Uzal, Doc Quinn and others. Very softly, Tommy said, "It will go down, Chancery, as the mad play of a greedy little man who tried to play god."

They turned on him, all twenty of those desperate, fully armed renegades. The shock of him being there had the effect of holding them dazed for a full minute. The gang looked to Chancery then, and he rallied from the feeling that Tommy's appearance signalled doom at their backs. The fool, it seemed, had come in alone when he might have led in enough to. . . .

"Obliging of you, fella," he sneered. "Coming to me, saving me the trouble of digging you out. You must be tired of living."

"Tired of living on the same earth with you, Chancery," he said, and all patience ran out of him. It was eight feet to the end of the bar and as he stooped and lunged for it, his gun tilted up and spoke.

He heard Hell-cat Hoban's breath explode, knew he had missed Jarv Chancery as the man behind him screamed and died. A bullet burned his side as he gained the shelter of the counter. Then he was sending his shots across the board and shouting, for Jarv Chancery, whom he could no longer see in that shifting, smoke-wreathed kaleidescope, to show himself.

Now Tommy's gun was empty and he went to the floor to reload, the blast of guns a terrible concussion in the barroom, bullets splintering through the bar front and thudding into the wall behind. Filling his lungs, trying for calmness, he jammed in fresh loads, scuttled to the far end of the counter and came up shooting.

A slug, barely missing, scuffed the bar top, stinging his face with slivers. A man with tawny hair and longhorn mustaches charged him. Tommy shot him in the chest, watched him rise to tiptoe and pitch down, screaming. And then Tommy saw Chancery. A man, lying prone and apparently dead in one corner, came erect, suddenly, carrying his gun up with dreadful deliberation. Chancery! Tommy beat him to the shot, but even as he aimed, a bullet caught him, jerking him to one side. Chancery missed and Tommy slipped to his knees, shuddering.

With trembling left hand, Tommy tried to wipe away the film that spread before his eyes. The yells, the shots, the tram-

pling of shifting men, all these seemed suddenly far away. Gathering his strength, he forced himself along on his knees to where he could peer around the bar end.

Desperately Tommy shook his head, partly cleared his vision, and lifted his gun with both hands as he saw the contorted face of the Roadrunner. Chancery, gloating over Tommy's struggle, saw the gun come up and hurled a slug designed to halt it. But his carelessness was his undoing. The bullet plucked at Tommy's shoulder.

Tommy fired with the last of his determination and strength. His face went to the floor and he lay there like a dead man, not knowing that his shot had broken Chancery's thigh bone, dropping him helpless to the floor.

* * *

Out of a deep black pit, Tommy struggled toward the light, like the man climbing up three steps and sliding back two. And now a sort of consciousness held him at the brink, a consciousness barbed with pain and weakness.

Voices came to him. "If I'd uh had ary idea the yearlin' was headed right onto the guns of that gang, I'd uh bin there tuh side him. . . ." That was Uzal.

"Then Doc would have you as well as Tommy on his hands," said Captain McSween. "The boy did all right alone, though it was a desperate chance he took. Seven men dead and the Roadrunner crippled so he was meat for our pot-pie when we charged the place. The sergeant has written a glorious chapter into the annals of Fort Adobes."

A soft hand stroked Tommy's brow and Lou Ann asked: "Is Tommy really in the army, Captain McSween?"

"He has seen service in the north—Navajo Patrol, finished his hitch and came home to help his father. Last night . . . er . . . this morning at three o'clock, he became a sergeant-major in my command. Much as I would admire to keep him, I shall not send his papers in. He's needed too badly here, isn't that true, Miss Ledyard?"

"Far too badly, Captain."

"He's beginning to come around." That was Doc Quinn's voice. "If you don't all get out of here and leave him with me and his nurse . . ."

"Right," said Captain McSween. "I have urgent business at the Agency. And I'd like to see Lassiter Ide's face when I tell him Chancery, Gilean, Hoban and his other snake-nest cronies are dead or bound for Federal Prison and that he's under arrest. Come on Ledyard, Pingree." Ledyard lingered for a word with Lou Ann, a swift question.

"You love him, daughter?"

"I think I've always loved him, Dad."

"You've made a poor job of showing it, girl. Maybe you can make it up to him. Quinn, whatever I've got out there—land, cattle, horses—all or any part of it is yours if you pull Tommy through. This country needs the like of him."

"It does," said the medico, tartly, "and you kill him with talk. If you want him to live, get out."

It was quiet then, and Tommy wrenched his eyes open. Lou Ann was staring into his face with such a look as he had never seen before. And such a sweetness that he wondered if he had been blind, those years before he went away. She laid her cheek against his, murmuring, "You . . . you can't die now, Tommy."

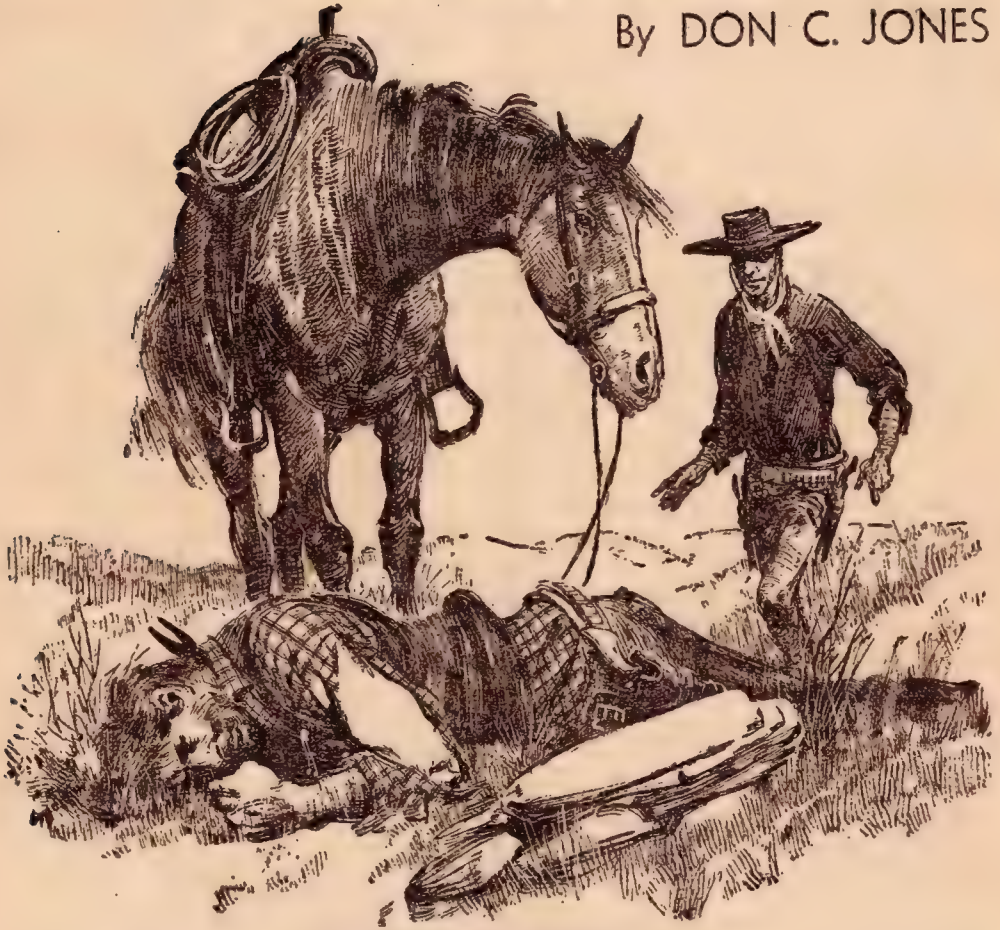
His hand found hers and he managed a smile. "Die? I never considered it, honey. I've got a saloon to turn into a schoolhouse for Pima kids that live off the reservation, a trading post to build up, a girl to marry and a house to build for kids of my own."

Her smile was his answer. There was no need for words.

THE END

A GUN-WOLF IS BORN

By DON C. JONES



Hannaford was lying face-down. . . .

The Kid had talked the whole town into thinking he was a fanged curly wolf from beyond the Forks of Bitter Creek. But unless he could stop those fangs from chattering now, Varney's back-talking Colt would auger him plumb to Boothill!

THE two of them loped into Two Trees that morning with no intention of stopping. It was just a town that stood somewhere between the northern border of Dakota from whence they came to the southern edge of Texas for which they were bound. The small one was called Kid Saline by those who knew him. He sat erect in his saddle as if he were somehow trying to stretch out the smallness of his frame. The larger one was older, and a dark matted beard covered his

face. Bill Hannaford was his handle. Certain friends, knowing his quiet nature, called him Wild Bill.

They reined to a walk on the main street and gawked their way through it. But when they were opposite the Two Trees Cafe, they came to a stop without being conscious that they had done so. Kid Saline wet his lips and looked at Hannaford. The bigger man was green. The odor of ham and eggs was making them both sick. They hadn't had a decent meal in two days.

Kid Saline swallowed. "We're eating here," he said after a moment. He moved over to the hitch rail and dismounted.

Hannaford's voice was a croak. "We ain't got a dime between us. You and that tinhorn—"

"I'm makin' it up to you," Kid Saline said. "We're eatin' here. I'll think of somethin'."

"You're always thinkin' of somethin'," Hannaford groaned. "That's how come we're starving. I want to eat, but if it depends on one of your ideas, it ain't worth it."

The Kid rolled a smoke and tucked it above his ear. "That's gonna taste good after breakfast," he said softly and turned toward the door of the cafe. Hannaford shook himself loose from his saddle and scrambled weak-legged after him.

There was nothing pretentious about the Two Trees Cafe. It was a small room with a door to the kitchen and a side door that went somewhere else. There were two long tables. At one of them sat a town man, gulping down ham and eggs. Hannaford sat across from him and stared open-mouthed at the food on the plate. The Kid sat down and stared too, but what fascinated him was the fact that the man's string tie just missed the egg yolk with each forward lunge he made at the food. The man suddenly stopped eating, and swung his arm toward a sign.

"In case you can't read, that sign says that cattlemen will stay out of this cafe when they're wearing range clothes." The man punctuated his remark with a belch.

The Kid's eyes narrowed. "That ain't no way to talk to the Badlands Kid. Maybe you ain't heard."

Hannaford suddenly seemed to have a coughing spell. At the same time, the Kid looked up to see a sow-bellied waiter with a handle-bar mustache and a hair part which partially covered a bald-spot.

"Get out," the waiter said.

The Kid pushed back his chair and stretched out to his full five feet. He took the smoke from behind his ear, re-wetted the paper and put it back. He took off his hat and placed it on a chair.

"Don't reckon I heard that right," the Kid said.

"I said get out. Right now. That sign means business."

"Reason I asked," Kid Saline drawled, "is that the last man that said that to the Badlands Kid is now restin' comfortably in a deep hole in Montana."

A feminine voice broke in. "What is this?"

THE Kid turned toward the side door, and his mouth dropped. It was like looking at a cameo. Black hair shining, fine looking eyes and face. Color in her cheeks. Face a little thin maybe. Like she was worried, permanent-like.

The Kid bowed-silently. "We're hungry, Ma'am. We ain't et for some time. Been ridin'. Ridin' and not eatin' is hard on a man, Ma'am."

The girl stared for a long time at the town man sitting at the table. Then she said softly, "You may eat here. Serve them, Joe."

The town man got up from the table. "I want to talk to you, Marta." To the Kid it sounded like a growl.

The girl sighed. "All right, Varney. Let's talk again." She went out the side door, and the man named Varney fol-

lowed her without turning back. The Kid noted the bulges under Varney's spotless gray coat, and he clucked his tongue.

When the waiter went grumbling into the kitchen, Hannaford turned to the Kid as he sat down. "Kid, let's git out. I've lost my appetite. You making yourself out an owlhoot gun slinger jest about makes me throw up everything I ain't had for the last two days."

"We're gonna eat, ain't we?"

"We could better be hungry, than in trouble from your lying."

"I ain't lied," the Kid said indignantly. "I am the Kid, ain't I?"

"Yeah, but you ain't no gun slinger; you ain't no badman. You're jest a overripe kid with enough imagination and guts to get us into trouble and keep us there." Hannaford paused and wiped his stubble covered face. "Look, Kid, I didn't mind when you decided to run up our two hundred dollars savings and then lost it all to that tinhorn. I don't even mind that we worked all summer on the northern ranges to get that. I don't mind that we was planning to have a little town fun, and then maybe ride back to Texas on a train instead o' riding them worked-out mounts we got. All I say is let's stay out of trouble for a few days at least!" How we gonna pay for this breakfast, Kid? Tell me that?"

They had two plates of ham and half a dozen eggs apiece; and when it was over, the Kid leaned back in his chair, his belly warm and comfortable. He took the cigarette from behind his ear and lit up.

The waiter, Joe, standing nearby snarled, "That'll be two bucks apiece. Ham is scarce in these parts. This ain't pig country."

The Kid looked first at Hannaford and then back at Joe, and the smoke dribbled from his nose. He got up slowly and put on his hat. He stretched. "Joe," he explained as if he were talking to a child, "You ain't been readin' the papers. The Kid don't pay his debts in money. Ain't you heard that? Not that the Kid don't always pay his debts one way or another. Most people is happy to do things for the Kid. They get so much back ever' time they do."

Joe picked up a chair and started to swing, but the feminine voice cut again. "That'll do, Joe. You can go back to the kitchen. I'll handle this."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Kid Saline said. "Shore would hate to kill a man who brought me such a fine breakfast."

Joe went into the kitchen, muttering oaths. The girl swished across to the table. Seeing her this close did things to the Kid's blood. He began to think he'd eaten too much. He caught himself looking at the nice way Marta filled out her dress.

"I've never heard of the Badlands Kid," Marta said.

The Kid raised his eyebrows.

"However, it doesn't matter," she said quickly. "I don't keep up on those things. But if you're really the man you say you are, and if you really pay your debts, I've got a job for you. It will mean three hundred dollars for the two of you, a room in the hotel that I own adjoining this cafe, and all the food you can eat."

The Kid whistled. "Who do you want killed, Ma'am?" He was being humorous, but she didn't catch it that way.

She said, "Varney." Her face suddenly looked drawn. "I don't mean necessarily that he should be killed," she flustered. "I'd just like it—if he suddenly left town."

IT WAS two hours later before Kid Saline made his way up to the room that Marta had arranged for them. Hannaford would already be there. The Kid wondered how Hannaford would feel now about this proposition the girl had offered them. He hadn't liked it at all at first.

He opened the door, found Hannaford sprawled on the bed staring at the ceil-

ing. A cigar stuck through the mass of black hair on his face, and his right hand was clasping the neck of a bottle.

"I see you've started to spend our down payment money," the Kid said.

Hannaford swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. "It ain't doin' no good, Kid. I can still think. And what I'm thinkin' is let's get out of here."

The Kid rolled a smoke and tucked it above his ear. He pulled up a chair and dropped into it. "We'll only get one chance like this in a hundred years. Look, we got a nice room. We got all the eatin' we want, and it would take us a year to make three hundred dollars rastlin' dogies."

"A man only gets kilt once too," Hannaford remarked emphatically. He tipped the bottle to his lips, and liquid fire gurgled down his throat. When the bottle came away, Hannaford said, "What's the girl's story?"

"This Varney person has her all tied up in legal papers. He moved out here from the east ten-twelve years ago. Loaned Marta's father money to start the cafe and hotel. But if the hotel don't make so much money accordin' to the terms of the loan, Varney can take over. At the same time, Varney writes a clause which says that he has the right to select the kind of people that will stay in the hotel and eat at the Cafe. That's how come that sign down there. Marta's Dad worried himself until he died. Now Varney is after the girl. In more ways than one. Marta ain't giving in—but she's near. That's how come we got a job. If we don't get rid of Varney, Marta's through. She told me that."

The Kid reached in his pocket and threw a couple of small boxes on the bed. "I figure we ought to clean up our guns, and start putting shells in 'em. That's ammunition."

Hannaford stared at the boxes for a minute, then hit the bottle again. After a moment he said, "Kid, for two years now we been riding together. Neither of us has shot a man. Neither of us could hit the flat side of a b[illegible]te. Now we got to be outlaw gunmen. Everytime you open your jaws we're in trouble. But this is the worst." He tipped up the bottle again, and when he put it down it was empty.

The Kid took the smoke down from his ear and placed it between his lips. His eyes were thoughtful. "Bill, you don't have to get in on this play. You can take your fifty and mine too and ride."

Hannaford shook his head. "I'll wait awhile, I reckon. I couldn't sleep nohow if I left now." He scratched his half bald head and said, "Well, what do we do first?"

The Kid grinned, lighted his smoke, and leaned forward in his chair. "Build us a rep. I'm the Badlands Kid and you're sidin' me. We got to be tough and gun-happy. We got to drop hints that Varney

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is the man we're after. Nobody likes him, so we might get a little support from the people. We'll try to scare him out of town."

Hannaford shook his head pessimistically. "An' what do I do?"

"Make the rounds of the saloons, an' keep talking."

"It'll take all the whiskey they got before I can lie the way you do," Hannaford said.

The Kid smiled. "Once you get started, it's easy. Man jest cain't stop."

THEY spent the rest of the morning buying new clothes, cleaning themselves, and removing sand from their hardware. When the Kid fastened on his twin gunbelts, the leather was slick and the gun butts that protruded from the twin holsters looked like business.

By evening, people were getting the idea. When the Kid stretched his legs down the boardwalk, people stepped aside and stared. And Hannaford's reputation as a man who could drink barrels and still not get drunk was growing each hour.

That evening the editor of the *Weekly Cattleman* visited them, and the following day, the Kid and Hannaford read the headline news in the paper:

BADLANDS KID VISITS TWO TREES ON MYSTERIOUS BUSINESS

The famous Badlands Kid, known in areas west and north, is here on business which he refuses to divulge. Although little is known of the Kid's background by this writer, it is felt by many that he is here to repay a kindness through his unusual prowess with a sixgun. It is reputed that a certain ex-eastern lawyer, himself no slouch as a gun-man (readers will remember the two shoot-outs of last fall) is to be the victim.

In an interview today, your editor found the Kid to be a small, curly-headed, innocent appearing individual. One might say that he is even handsome, but your editor wishes to remind his readers that this type of appearance is typical of the famous gunslingers of the last few years.

With the Kid is his riding pard, Wild Bill Hannaford. Hannaford appears to be an older man, and in direct contrast to the kid, is a somber, cautious and conservative individual. Joe Hanegan of HANEGAN'S SALOON states that Hannaford can drink whiskey like most people drink water, and with the same apparent effect.

The questions on everybody's lips are: "How long will it be? How much patience will the Kid have? And where will it occur?"

As a public service, your editor suggests to all men folk of this area, that when you come to town, you leave the kids and the missus behind. The Badlands Kid personally told me that he wouldn't harm a hair on a woman or a child's head, but he is afraid that the other party may be wild in his lead slinging, and the Kid doesn't want to see anyone hurt.

The next morning, the Kid and Wild Bill Hannaford stepped out into the morning sun burning down on the alkali dust of main street. Passers-by nodded and smiled, and the Kid smiled back. Hannaford hitched up his gun-belts and said, "You want I should go along?"

The Kid shook his head.

"Then I'll go down to the livery and check our horses and gear," Hannaford said. "I got a feelin' we're gonna be ridin' 'fore many hours go by."

The Kid nodded and stared down the street, his eyes fixed on a sign that read:

LOANS—ATTORNEY AT LAW
Gilbert J. Varney.

"I guess I better be goin'."

The inner office of Gilbert J. Varney was plush. There were three leather covered chairs in the room, pictures of dancing girls and horses on the walls. And in one corner was a huge roll-top desk with a fine, expensive finish. Varney was seated there when the Kid walked in.

"I'VE BEEN expecting you," Varney said, gesturing the Kid into a leather chair.

The Kid sat down and took a long minute to roll a smoke. He placed it above his ear, then looked at Varney. "Lots of dinero sunk here, Varney. You've done all right."

Varney grinned and leaned back in his

chair. His long fingers drummed the arms of his chair. "A smart man always has money—or better yet—he knows where he can get it."

"Or anything else he wants," the Kid added.

Varney agreed.

"Such as Marta. . . ."

The smile disappeared from Varney's face and his eyes went dark. After a moment he wet his lips and said, "Kid, you're a faker. But you're smart. All this is none of your business and you know it. But I'll pay your price. I'll give you five hundred in cash and you can leave—alive."

The Kid found his heart beating overtime. Five hundred was more money than he had ever seen, but he found himself shaking his head and saying, "The Kid pays his debts, Varney."

"Don't be a fool," Varney snapped. "You don't expect me to believe that a couple of saddle tramps are willing to get themselves killed just because a pretty girl let them eat breakfast in her cafe?" Varney angrily put a cheroot in his mouth and said after a moment, "Or maybe it's the girl?"

The Kid didn't answer. Instead he took the cigarette from behind his ear, lighted it, and spent a couple of minutes enjoying the fragrance of the smoke.

Varney was irritated. The redness of the lawyer's face caused the kid to grin. Then the Kid said, "Varney, I'm waiting for a better proposition."

"Such as?"

"You tear up the papers that are tying Marta in knots and then move on."

"And if I don't?"

The Kid looked at the red end of his cigarette. He shrugged.

Varney laughed, but there was no humor in it. "And how long have I got?"

"Tomorrow at sundown."

Varney stood up and towered over the Kid. The Kid noted his spotless gray clothes. The dark vest, the shiny black boots—the gun bulges under the suit-coat that had been tailored to fit over them. "Look, cowboy. A man who makes money learns how to defend it. Maybe you earned your reputation. I don't know. But I do know that I've earned mine. Jake Klingenberg found that out a year ago. He didn't like the terms of a loan. He came in and drew on me. There were plenty of witnesses who saw it. I killed him with my first shot. Later Hank Solem, a friend of Jake's, tried to bushwhack me from the door of Hanegan's Saloon. Hank threw down three times on me. I got him with the first shell I fired; my second killed him."

The Kid carefully crushed his cigarette under his high heel and stood up. "When the time comes, lawyer, I'll kill you with my good gun hand tied behind my back. You've got till tomorrow at sundown." He turned and without looking back, went down the short steps into the street. He was surprised that a small crowd had gathered. Some one shouted, "When is it, Kid?"

"Tomorrow at sundown," the Kid said and turned down the street.

HE WANTED to talk to Hannaford. In the back of his mind was the plaguing idea that he had overextended himself. The plan was that Varney would scare out of town. But it wasn't working. And for the first time, the Kid wholly agreed with Hannaford. He was a fool.

He walked to the livery, nodding absently to people on the street. Inside the stable, he found no one. He paused for a moment inside the door, then yelled. No answer. He went down a line of stalls, and at one of them a saddle on a rack attracted his attention. It was fancy, tooled, inlaid in silver. The kid grinned. He wondered if Hannaford had seen that. Hannaford was a bug on fancy saddles.

The Kid kept walking until he came to the stall where his own roan was standing.

He patted the horse lovingly on the rump, then looked in the next stall.

The stall was empty, the saddle was missing, Hannaford was gone.

The Kid leaned against the edge of the stall and breathed heavily and tried to think. Without Hannaford, he was what his name implied—a kid.

He stayed in the stable for a couple of hours. He cursed himself for a fool, and he cursed Hannaford for not giving him more time to work this out. He cursed the livery man for not being there; he cursed Varney for being the gunman he apparently was. And when he finally walked out of the livery, he was shaken, confused, wondering what he should do next. Without Hannaford, he was lost.

He made for the hotel and once inside, went directly to his room. He bolted the door, and flung himself on the bed. He listened for footsteps outside the door; and when he heard them, he thought they might belong to Hannaford, but they always went past the door and into another room.

At supper time, he heard a knock on the door. He shook himself loose from the bed and leaped up. It was Marta, not Hannaford. The girl came into the room, closed the door and bolted it. She said quickly, "I want you to go, Kid. Now." There was terror in her voice.

The Kid nodded. "All right. If you say so."

"Varney was here," Marta went on, and the Kid noticed that even with fear in her eyes, this girl was the prettiest he had ever seen. "Varney has been trying to check on you two. The B-Bar up near the Canadian border admitted that they had a couple of waddies who answered to your names working for them this summer."

The Kid said, "So now he thinks he can kill me, then twist you any way he wants."

"I guess you could put it that way," she said softly. "But go, Kid. It won't be any easier if you stay around. I'd have your death on my conscience, and I couldn't stand that."

The Kid reached in his pocket and took out twenty dollars in currency. It was what he had left from the fifty Marta had given him. He handed it to her. She pushed it back.

"I ain't done nothing to earn this, Marta."

"Yes, you have. You gave me hope for a little while." She turned then, unbolted the door, and ran out. The Kid thought he heard a muffled sob as she went.

In a kind of daze, still staring at the partially opened door, he muttered bitterly, "The Kid always pays his debts. Then he gathered his gear and left the hotel feeling like a coyote with his tail between his legs.

He hurried, head down, across the street, little twirls of dust rising from his boot heels. He tried to notice no one, but the corner of his eye caught sight of a rider entering the main street from the south. He knew the figure and the dress. It was Varney.

A momentary impulse urged him to hide in the nearest building, but his feet seemed rooted. Varney approached and reined up his palomino and leaned forward on the saddle horn. The Kid noted a Winchester mounted in a saddle holster. Varney smirked.

"You leavin', Kid? I'm surprised."

The Kid took a cigarette from behind his ear and rolled it between his lips. "Yeah, I'm leavin' But I'm comin' back."

"Like Hannaford, maybe," Varney snorted. It was a slip of the tongue. The Kid could see that by the furrows that suddenly appeared on Varney's forehead.

The Kid found himself staring at Varney's Winchester, and a coldness snaked down his spine. Then "What do you know about Hannaford?" he said.

Varney shrugged. "Heard he left town and ain't coming back."

A crowd was gathering. People dis-

mounted horses, got out of buggies to edge closer. Men coming out of saloons looked around, saw what was happening, and left the uniformity of the boardwalk for the dirt and ruts of the street.

The Kid scratched a match and lit the cigarette. "Varney, Hannaford was my pard. If anything has happened to him, you'll die slow tomorrow."

Varney flushed. "Kid, we all know what you are—just a cowpoke shooting off his mouth. You're a faker, a liar. We've had enough of you in this town. Now get out before we plant you up there on the hill."

The Kid flicked his cigarette into the muddy gutter. "Tomorrow." he said quietly. "At sundown."

AT THE livery, the Kid found his roan and kak, and began saddling up. The oldster who ran the place, pinched-faced, bent-backed individual, came in and the Kid paid him up.

The oldster fumbled with the currency, and said after a moment, "Hate to see you go, Kid. You and the other feller that left this morning."

The Kid tied down his fishskin to his cantle, then swung up. "Where's he go?"

"Varney'd kill me if I told. But see that fancy saddle over there?"

The Kid nodded.

"There's a man that does that kind of work out at the Crazy-Z spread. Best way to get there is to follow Lead Creek. You can't miss."

The Kid thought for a moment, then grinned. "Thanks, friend."

"I ain't told you nothing," the oldster said. "I could see you were interested in that saddle. Ain't nothing wrong with that is there?"

"Nope." The Kid grinned again and rode out of the livery.

The fear that clutched the Kid's stomach was confirmed not five miles out of town. The Kid first saw Hannaford's gray gelding, then, scrambling down the creek embankment where night was seeping into the crevices, he found Hannaford. He was lying face down, his feet in the cold water of the stream, his Stetson caught in the brush ten feet away.

The Kid swallowed hard and for a minute forgot to breathe. Then he moved quickly forward, grabbed Hannaford under the arm pits, and dragged his sodden boots out of the water. It was then the Kid noticed the red splotch which stained the back of his pard's shirt. He pulled Hannaford up to the high ground, caught his gray, and found a bottle in the cantle roll. It was minutes before Hannaford showed signs of life.

They stayed there that night. The Kid built a little fire and rolled Hannaford in all the blankets they had. It was along toward morning before Hannaford began making sense with his talk.

"Hit bad?" Hannaford groaned.

"Shoulder. But you bled plenty. Who did it?"

Hannaford took his time answering. "Varney did it, Kid. Fired three times as I was fallin'. I seen him plain, but I don't think he knows it."

The Kid nodded silently. "When do you figure you'll be fit for ridin'?"

He watched Hannaford's face lighted by the embers of the fire. "Kid, it'll be a week before we can do much heavy ridin' for Texas."

"I didn't mean Texas, Bill. Not right away. I meant Two Trees."

Hannaford pushed himself up and stared at the Kid. He tried to talk but it came out a croak. He tried it again. "Kid, I ain't in proper condition to be joked with."

The Kid said, "I ain't joking. I got a date with Varney."

Hannaford flopped to his back again. "I thought you'd learned. I thought as I lay there plugged—well, now maybe the Kid will pay some mind to me and not go fooling around with dynamite. Dammit,

Kid, I was almost glad I got shot. In fact, I may have sorta leaned into the bullet a bit. I figured that would bring you around if nothin' else would. Kid, if you go back to town, we can count the hours we got to live on both hands."

The Kid stood up and looked down. "You don't have to go, Bill. This was my doing. I'll handle it."

Hannaford pushed himself up again. "Dammit, Kid, you're really starting to believe you could face Varney in a shoot-out."

"I told him I could."

"So you're going' back there to show him you got guts."

"No. I keep seein' Marta. And I keep seein' the other people in the town and the way they looked at Varney and the way they cheered me. And I keep thinkin' of you ridin' out here along the creek to look at some saddles and gettin' cut down from behind. That shows one thing, Bill. Varney is a little scared of us too."

"I need some sleep." Hannaford said. "Maybe then I could ride a bit. Maybe as far as Two Trees boothill."

THE Kid slept during the morning. And Hannaford watched him, inwardly squirming at his calmness. This younker with hardly more than down on his face was going to lead them both to the final resting, and he could sleep through the preparation for it!

At noon they ate the last of their saddle rations, and Hannaford threw his dry bottle into the river bed. By three o'clock in the afternoon, the Kid had caught and saddled up the two horses. The Kid helped Hannaford into the saddle. The older man's face was white from loss of blood, pain, or fear; the Kid couldn't tell which.

They reached town an hour before sundown. It was a queer procession. The Kid was slightly in the lead, his face like stone. Hannaford was behind. He was bent over his saddle horn, and clinging to it. The Kid couldn't look at Hannaford. He had tried it once and pangs of guilt had knotted his stomach. This trip might kill the older man.

People lined the streets and stared, but when the Kid yelled that he wanted a doctor for Hannaford, the crowd surged forward, helped Hannaford from his saddle, and carried him into a building. The Kid followed.

Doc Winthrop was an expert on gunshot wounds. He was short, and bald, and wore a neatly trimmed gray mustache. The doc produced a full bottle of rye and placed it in Hannaford's hands. Wild Bill mumbled his thanks and lying face down on a table, twisted his neck to let huge gulps of the liquor flow down his throat.

Doc cleared the room of the curious onlookers and went to work. The Kid couldn't watch. He went outside and leaned against the side of the building. His eyes were on the sun.

A half hour later, the doc came out, Hannaford following. Hannaford was bent and the bulge of a bandage was plainly visible beneath his shirt. "He'll do," the Doc said. "But the pain will be hell for awhile. Better let him rest here for a week or so. Better let me look at him once in while. And no charge either, Kid."

The Kid, flicking a sideways glance at the sun, now low on the horizon, said, "Varney and me has business. Where can I find him?"

The curious crowd of silent people suddenly cheered. And some yelled, "He's at the hotel, Kid! Went there half an hour ago."

Hannaford stumbled forward, and the Kid held him from falling. "Take care of him, Doc," the Kid said.

He started walking. He knew from the babble of voices behind him that the crowd was following. He turned in at the hotel and closed the door behind him. Marta was behind the desk. Varney was talking to her. Two men in the small lobby got

up and found business elsewhere. The Kid looked around. The crowd had not followed him in. Only the three of them were in the room. Marta lost all the color in her face, and her small hands gripped the edge of the desk.

Varney forced a grin which revealed his teeth clenched firmly together. He pushed himself away from the desk.

"I give the sun ten minutes to be out of sight," the Kid said. "I'll be up at the other end of the street."

"Don't be a fool," Varney grunted.

"You got two chances," the Kid went on. "First, you can fix things up decent with Marta, then come out into the middle of the street and shuck your guns, git on your horse and ride. That's the sensible way."

"And the other?"

"The other is to go for your guns. In that case, pick a spot in the street where you want to die."

"Kid—" Marta pleaded.

"The Kid pays his debts."

Marta came from behind the desk and walked swiftly to him. She looked up into his eyes, her head shaking slowly from side to side. "Kid, don't you see. Varney knows about you. He knows you two are just a couple drifting cowpokes. Don't you understand that if you start this fight, Varney can kill you and do it in self-defense?"

"VARNEY thinks he knows," the Kid said slowly. "But he don't know nothing. The thing the Kid is most noted for is covering up his tracks. All that Varney actually knows is that he can't find no tracks. He'll discover the truth in the few seconds before he dies." He turned then and walked out into the street. Only the very tip of the sun was showing. He walked down the boardwalk a hundred feet and stepped into the street. People who had been crossing the street hurried to reach the walk.

THE Kid waited, for what he didn't know. Death maybe. No maybe about it. If Varney decides to throw down, he was one dead cow-wrestler. But meanwhile, his mind swirled back over the past few days, and he wondered if he had slipped up? Could he have made the story better?

Now the hotel door opened, and Varney came out. He had taken off his coat, and the gun belts were now plainly visible. Varney wanted a quick and easy draw.

Varney walked straight to the middle of the street, his hands hovering near the butts of his guns.

"We're too far apart," Varney snarled and he started walking slowly, stiffly toward the Kid.

"Sure," the Kid yelled back. "Pick your spot in the street, then reach. Pick a good soft spot."

Varney stopped and shouted again, "I'd like these people to know that you were the man who was going to kill me with one hand tied behind your back."

The Kid turned to the crowd. "Anybody got a piggin' rope?"

A man stepped hesitantly forward.

"Tie my right hand behind my back. Tie it to my belt," the Kid ordered. "Then when you get through with that, throw my left gun in the street and fix my right for a cross-draw."

The man shrugged and stepped behind the Kid. From the crowd came the sound of Hannaford's voice. "Kid . . . ."

The Kid turned, saw Hannaford elbowing his way toward him.

"Kid, don't be . . . ."

"You think I ain't givin' him enough of a chanc't, Bill?" The Kid asked quickly. "All right, take out both guns. Put 'em ten feet in front of me. Make me pick 'em up out of the dirt, and still Varney will die."

Hannaford was white. He gulped. "But Varney is good . . . he's killed two."

"All right. But still I'll kill him with

my unnatcheral hand and makin' a cross-draw to boot. Varney ain't no better than Dan Jennings. Dan had five to his credit, and I got him with the same kind of a draw."

"Dan Jennings?"

"Yeah," said the Kid. "Dan Jennings!"

The man who had been tying the Kid's hand behind his back was through now. He came around to the side, removed the Kid's left gun and placed the right one in backwards. Then he hurried to the safety of the boardwalk.

The Kid turned back to Varney. The lawyer's face was sallow and taut, and the Kid grinned. "All right, Varney. Go for 'em. The closer you get the easier it makes it for me."

Varney paused a moment. Kid Saline could see the sweat on the lawyer's face, could see the tenseness, and suddenly he could feel the terrific tension in himself. He knew then that he was defeating himself, and he forced himself to relax, to grin, to look around at the faces on the boardwalk staring at him open-mouthed.

Varney had not moved for several seconds now. His feet were spread slightly apart. He was not fifteen feet away.

"If that's the spot you've choosed," Kid Saline said, "let's get it over with." His voice seemed strange to him, and as he reached for the cigarette behind his ear, he prayed that Varney would not see the trembling of his fingers. They were only ten feet apart now.

Varney was flexing his hands not six inches from his gun butts. The Kid tried to do likewise, but his arms were numb, and he could no longer command them. His legs seemed to move in spite of himself.

"God, he's a cool one!" somebody gasped. "He's even gonna let Varney draw first!"

The words made him numb all over, froze him.

He wondered if the paralysis had crept down to his legs, and he moved one foot forward experimentally.

"He's not even looking at Varney!" A man whispered incredulously. "He's just staring at his feet!"

"Look at his eyes!" somebody else murmured. "Killer's eyes!"

The Kid wondered if he had strength enough for another step; if he could suddenly wheel and run. Hesitantly, he moved his other foot forward.

"Stay where you are!" Varney screamed.

The words struck him like a blow, and his whole body stiffened, jerked forward.

"Here it comes!" someone whispered.

It was at that moment Varney suddenly turned and began to sprint toward his office, but he never got there. The mob which had been lining the boardwalk suddenly surged forward. Varney went down under a mass of fists and feet. They knew him now for what he was. A coward. Varney would leave Two Trees now. He could do nothing else.

Kid Saline still stood in the street. He dared not move for fear that he would collapse. His hand was still tied behind his back. People surged by him trying to get at Varney, and the Kid wondered at the way it had happened.

He caught a momentary glance at Hannaford's back. The old-timer was disappearing in Hanegan's saloon.

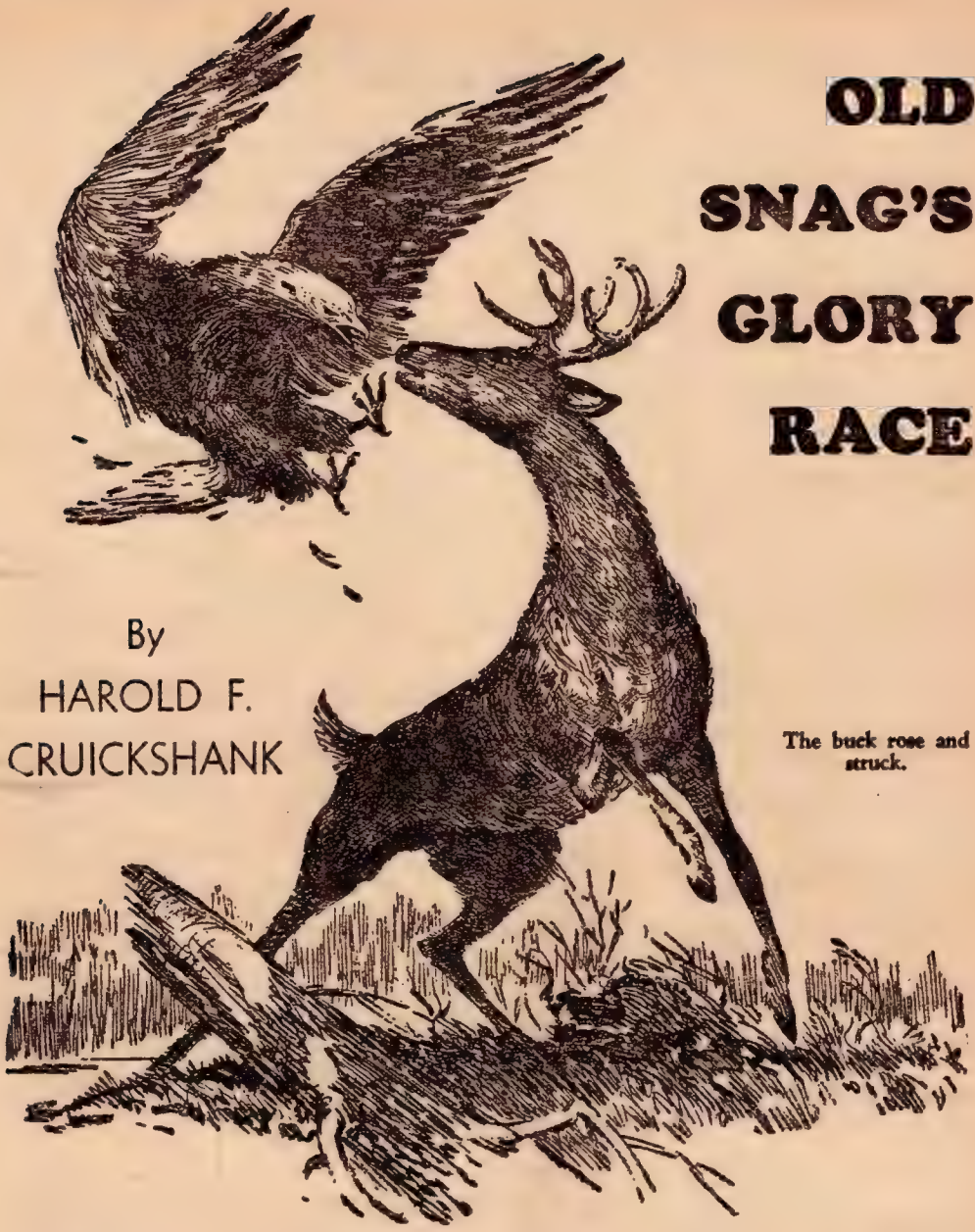
Marta was suddenly beside him, her eyes full of tears and laughter at the same time. Quickly she untied the pigging rope that bound his right hand behind his back. She came to the front of him and stood just inches away.

"Well," Marta said, "both your arms are free. Aren't you going to kiss me?"

The Kid flushed. The cigarette dropped from his lips. "Gosh, Marta. Not here. Not with all these people. I ain't got the guts!"

OLD SNAG'S GLORY RACE

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK



The buck rose and struck.

The dread cry of hounds sounded through the still, morning air, and Old Snag, antlered monarch of the Wind River country, knew that the time had come for his fastest, deadliest race — straight toward his enemy's waiting trap!

"OLD SNAG," the blacktail bandit of the upper Wind River country, limped along, pausing every now and then to shake his huge antlered head at a couple of swooping eagles which pestered him.

It was the forest-and-game ranger who has christened the big king buck "Old

Snag." Paul Maguire, the ranger, had done so because of a freak snag tine on the big buck's off side antler—a long corkscrew-like tine with a deadly-sharp point.

A bullet had nicked Old Snag in the left leg, causing his limp, slowing him up. But despite his wound, the blacktail chieftain whirled every now and then to fight the eagles off. He whistled as he blew through his nostrils, tossing his head, or rising to slash with a deadly forehoof.

His big, beautiful eyes were flushed with the red color of his anger. From his early fawnhood he had developed a deep hatred of these big-winged killers.

An eagle hissed and screamed as it plummeted down to strike at one of the buck's eyes, but Old Snag was alert. He struck upward like lightning, his antlers knocking the feathered one off balance, downward.

The buck rose and struck. A set of deadly talons raked his tender muzzle, but he recovered and chopped down as the eagle attempted to rise. There was a soggy sound and then a crunching of bone.

The great curved beak of the killer opened and closed as he gasped, but again Old Snag chopped him, stomping down with all his force, driving feathers, flesh and bone into the ground.

Whistling, the big buck tossed his head high, challenging. But the other eagle was soaring up toward the cragland country. . . .

Old Snag stood as if frozen for some time, his sides blowing hard from his exertion. Then he turned in toward a scrub-covered rise of land, a favorite browsing area, where he snicked the budded seedlings of wild fruit trees.

Old Snag's antlers were magnificent in their velvet state, despite the distortion of their symmetry by the snag tine. When the sun struck his rusty-gray coat, with its white rump patches and black-tipped tail, he was indeed a picture—a creature all hunters coveted. But there were other man creatures who admired him with no desire to kill him for his head trophy. More than once, a maverick-hunting rider, or an oldster at a ranch's homeyard had been startled by the sudden appearance of the big buck.

There was one man creature, however, who deeply hated the big buck. He was Rimrock Ewing, a local nester. It was Rimrock who had recently wounded the big stag, with no other object than to kill, for the sake of clearing the range of the blacktail chieftain who now and then was guilty of snipping off some of Rimrock's seedling fruit bushes.

The nester seldom roamed the range without his long-barreled .45—90 rifle. He fired whenever he saw a deer jump. To him they were varmints—same as the cougars, bears, coyotes and wolves.

Killing Old Snag had become an obsession in the mind of Rimrock Ewing. And when he heard that a specimen-hunting party was coming up to the wild Wind River rage, Rimrock increased his hunting activities, determined to outwit the big stag and mount his antlers above the homestead fireplace.

Rimrock was satisfied that today he could easily pick up blood sign along the old stag's trail. His hopes were sharpened when he fetched up at the site of the eagle kill. From then on the buck's trail was easy to follow—leading on to the brush-covered hill country.

RIMROCK made a camp, but before full dusk had settled, he set a number of snares along the deer trails, paths which he knew Old Snag followed every now and then as he browsed on his favorite range.

But, examination of the snare sets the next day resulted in no victory for Rimrock Ewing. He swore bitterly when he discovered a few fresh tracks which carefully skirted his snares.

Rimrock raised and shook his rifle

booming inprecations. Then he turned and shuffled homeward, vowing to return to the hunt with other, better plans. He would try a salt-lick pit trap. He would arrange the trap with great care—on one side of a leaning windfall fence which the big stag would be forced to leap to get to the salt lick. The pit would be skillfully covered with light brush and leaves. . . . Rimrock chuckled as the plan developed in his mind. He could almost hear the crash of the falling buck; the snap of a broken neck. . . .

But, arriving home, Rimrock was met by a sharply-tongued barrage from his wife. In the night, she cried, a deer had browsed off her new raspberry canes.

"As a deer hunter you'd make on'y a fair harness maker," Maize Ewing yelled. "Wanderin' around the hills, nights, when all the time that dang beast is lickin' your salt here, and snickin' off my special fruit canes! You'd best leave that buck be, an' settle down to your hayin'—onless you break out that worthless pair of houn' dogs an' let them run Ol' Snag down for you."

Rimrock winced under the tongue lashing. He had often thought of cutting his hounds loose, but that form of deer running, especially in the closed season, wouldn't sit well in the mind of Ranger Paul Maguire. Yet, as Rimrock walked along the line of snipped-off raspberry canes, he glowered. It was just as if Old Snag had come in and spat in the old nester's eye.

"Mebbe you're right, Maize," Rimrock said. "Mebbe it is time I broke the houn's out. I got good reason—protection uh my crops. Just give me another week, Maize, and I'll have that buck. I'll get fresh canes for you, an' anyhow, our bluejoint grass ain't quite ready to cut yet. It's not in full flower. There's time."

"Time, yes, until a sudden hail storm busts the grass flat. Then you'll be forced to buy winter fodder. But all right. Another week, an' that's plumb final!"

Mumbling under her breath, Maize Ewing waddled off to feed her poultry, and a sly grin widened Rimrock's mouth. He had gotten out of the situation pretty well and Maize had put a useful idea into his head—an idea tht might well work along with his pit trap planning. He had a pair of good, well-trained hunting dogs. They were one thing all the folk over a wide district would give Rimrock credit for. They worked to his whistle, whether on deer or cougar trail, and could be relied on to hold the trail come hell or high water.

Rimrock strode to the pump to wash up, then on to the house to eat, and plan. . . . As he ate, he looked up at the stone fireplace and grinned as he visualized Old Snag's antlers there as a rifle rack. He'd clean the antlers and polish them with shellac. They would be something to gloat over when visitors called—the famous antlers of Old Snag, the buck which for years had out-witted Indian and white hunters alike. . . .

UP IN the high breaks , Old Snag snuffled the scent of man from his nostrils. He was thirsty, but dared not venture down to his drinking springs when the enemy's scent was so strong, so fresh.

He minced along, flicking his big, mule-like ears back and forth, pushing into the dew-drenched fruit thicket where he slacked his thirst by sucking in the dew.

The smell of newly-turned soil startled him. Possessed of an innate curiosity, he pushed gently through the shrubbery, coming to a sudden halt as he heard sounds and picked up very fresh scent of a man-creature. Then his sharp eyes glimpsed his enemy, beyond a leaning fence of aspen windfalls. . . .

Old Rimrock Ewing was hard at work on his pit trap set. He was proud of himself, for as he stole up through the brush he had come across fresh buck sign. Ewing

knew from experience that Old Snag and his kind were creatures of fairly regular habits. They moved, in their feeding, on and through definite paths, and Rimrock was sure that sooner or later Old Snag would again use this trail to the springs. It was only a matter of time, before the big buck would rise prodigiously to clear the windfall fence and then—the crash! Rimrock chuckled softly and cuffed his forehead. He had brought along a sack of coarse, hog-curing salt with which to sprinkle the top of his finished pit trap. He couldn't miss. He would show his nagging wife just how good a hunter he was!

Back a way, the wind in his favor, Old Snag wringled his nose as he tanged the salt. Many times in his life he had stood thus, frozen, watching weary hunters stride ahead, searching for him, only to discover, too late, that he had circled and come in on their own back trail.

When at last the man moved off, Old Snag shook himself. The seductive tang of the salt was fresher than ever. He minced delicately forward to the windfall, his big body quivering, but suddenly he stopped and blew raucously. The salt lick, however tempting, was far too strongly tainted with the dread scent of the man.

Old Snag tossed his antlered head angrily, slapped then whirled and moved on.

At sunset he was high in his favorite bedground area when suddenly he was startled by the sharp drum of hoofbeats. He sprang alertly when the wind brought him the scent of one of his kind—a bounding young buck, a long-yearling.

The ways of the wild creatures are strange, unaccountable. It is not uncommon for a young buck to seek alliance with an old king stag—either for company, for learning, or for protection. But Old Snag seldom brooked such gestures. He was a lone wanderer, save in the rutting season, or when, in the winter season, he and his kind banded together.

As the young buck chocked up short, a rod or so away, Old Snag snorted. He stamped first one forehoof and then the other into the turf. The youngling cringed, quivering as he backed off. But at dawn, he was still there on the small plateau, and this time Old Snag did not attack or threaten him.

Now, the big king buck in the lead, they moved off to browse. The young one limped badly. Flies bothered an old wound in his side, a wound which had become infected.

Old Snag kept his distance from the long yearling, and thus saved himself much torture from the fly hordes. His own bullet crease wound was healed, though every once in a while he led off to the lake to stand cooling himself deep in the sedges and mucky depths where occasionally he blew back the challenges of an old moose or elk feeding on the water lily roots.

Though the yearling buck sank to his own withers in the water and muck, he found little help for his serious wound.

DAY after day, evening after evening, he followed on in the tracks of the chieftain buck. When it came time to bed down he wisely sank to rest beside Old Snag, depending on protection from the big buck.

This night, he dropped to rest, while Old Snag stood guard. The big buck was restless. He started at every soft whisper of the breeze through the glade, at every stirring of some timorous rodent in the grass.

The deep, late summer night descended, though shortly the sky would become clear again. Off to westward sheet lightning made fantastic patterns across the horizon.

Old Snag was blinking into the pale, shuddering lights when suddenly a gust of wind brought him whirling about, head high, nostrils dilated. He stamped a forehoof sharply and the yearling buck sprang

up from his bed, to quiver at his side.

On the sudden, shifting wind had come the dread tang of cougar scent. But Old Snag did not panic, as many of his kind might. He stood his ground, mincing on his four hoofs. Though his body quivered with fear, for his antlers were still in the tender velvet, he wanted to be sure of the enemy's location before he broke, if break he must.

His eyes finally glimpsed the lurking cougar, a small, yearling lion attracted by the strong scent of the young buck's wound . . . a lion more venturesome than wise.

Suddenly the cougar leaped directly at the young buck. The youngster bounded, whirling, and as the lion scrambled by, Old Snag reared and chopped down with a forehoof. He raked the lion's back with a glancing blow which sent the tawny creature rolling into the brush.

Old Snag grunted and snorted as he chopped forward. He whistled and the young buck crowded his rear, quaking with fear.

When the cat recovered and sprang, Old Snag leaped sharply to one side. The young buck turned to bolt, and the sinewy cat stretched, landed on his back.

Old Snag's fighting impulses were wholly awakened now. He charged, rose, and brought a powerful foreleg into action. His hoof smashed the cougar to the ground, and with him, the quivering yearling buck, weakened by his great fear.

As the cat attempted to whirl clear, Old Snag was in on him, pounding, chopping, cutting.

Screeching, the cougar dragged his battered form deep into the brush, leaving blood behind.

The chieftain blacktail blew shrilly, but he made no effort to follow the enemy. He whirled about and sent the young buck tottering with a powerful sidewise slap from his head, expressing his contempt for the weakling. . . .

He led on—on toward a gushing spring in the higher country. He plunged his muzzle into the cold water, then tossed his head high to snort in defiance.

For some time the long-yearling slept, while Old Snag stood on guard, searching each fickle, quartering breeze. At last, he moved, circling the area before coming to a halt and slumping to his bedground. His eyes batted, then closed, for peace, however temporarily, had come again to his wild range.

EACH day, old Rimrock Ewing visited the deer runs, examining them for fresh sign. He swore bitterly when he failed to find a single fresh track around the site of his pit trap.

Then came a day when, forced by his wife to do some work around the home yard, he discovered that most of his prized apple seedlings, stout, promising

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Wealthies, had been snipped off in the night.

He raised his hoe, bellowing, and his cries were heard by his wife, who came waddling across the yard just as Rimrock discovered two sets of deer tracks.

"Ol' heller's found hisself a pard, Maize. Lookit!" Rimrock broke off, snorting disgustedly. "Lookit your spinach an' other greens," he boomed again. "It wasn't no antelope jack rabbt snipped them off. It—" He broke off. Maize was not too concerned about the loss of Rimrock's apple seedlings, but those greens—she had tended them carefully, making long water hauls from the creek. Now her eyes blazed as she wiped her hands on her apron.

A dog bayed from a shed close by, and Maize Ewing swung.

"Not another mouthful of food do them dog critters get until you bring me the antlers of that buck, Rimrock," she said raspingly.

Old Rimrock gave a hitch to his well-patched jeans and spat testily. Maize had played right into his hands. Maize was forcing him to break out the dogs, and if by chance he was caught by the ranger he could refer Maguire to Maize. Rimrock would at once sling a trail pack together and light out for the hill country, his muzzled hounds on the leash.

Up at Old Snag's favorite haunts, he would bide his time, hold the dogs in check until fresh buck trail was located, then Rimrock Ewing would show the world the efficacy of his training skill.

He chuckled thickly as he shifted his eating tobacco from one cheek to the other.

Slyly he turned to his wife and said, "Mebbe I should get about the hay cuttin', Maize. Like you said recent, it would be bad if'n a sharp storm struck the meadows." But Maize whirled sharply.

"You heard what I said, Rimrock. Make up your mind: either bring me the antlers of that blacktail bandit buck, or—out go them useless houn' dogs! I—" she broke off, to stare beyond the south fence. A pack train was moving by. Maize's eyes blazed as she sniffed sharply and called to her husband.

"See 'em!" she called. "A hunt party—city folk with Lem Strand guidin'. You'd best be about your huntin', pronto, afore they beat you to it. Go get that buck, understand?"

Rimrock was glaring at the rump of the last pack pony in the train. His hands balled into fists, opened and closed.

Now he turned and hurried to the house to get his pack together, a bait for himself and his dogs, and spare ammunition.

By an hour past noon, his dogs on the leash, he was heading to the north west, and as he reached the brush country he trod silently. Rimrock had laid careful plans, with all the strategy at his command. When the time was ripe for the chase, he could break loose the dogs and count on them to work to his high-pitched whistle. They had never failed him.

THE following morning, Old Snag rose to his feet, grunted when he felt the young buck stirring at his rear. The yearling gave out a low, quavering sound. His head was high, as high as he could raise it in his infirm condition, and he was sniffing sharply in the direction of the salt lick. More than once he had started to move toward it, only to be side-swiped almost from his feet by Old Snag.

Suddenly he was startled, brought whirling about by a sharp whistle from the big buck. The dawn breeze had freshened, bringing the dread tang of dogs.

Old Snag was frozen to immobility. Not even the tip of an ear moved. They were pricked well forward as he listened to distant sounds that grew alarmingly stronger with each passing moment.

The young buck now picked up these sounds and bleated in terror. Old Snag slapped angrily at him. Though strong

fears assailed him, he was still far from a state of panic, and he wanted to locate the source of danger before he broke and ran.

Danger came with sharp suddenness when a hound bayed close by, to the right of the main sounds of alarm. And now Old Snag could hear the drum of running feet.

He whirled, leaping. Old Snag cleared brush with ease. He bounded, with space to spare, over windfall labyrinths which caused his young running mate a lot of trouble.

Now they began to circle, Old Snag seemed to be barely veering at all, but he was wisely fetching around, bringing the wind into his favor. Not even his powerful limbs and superbly-conditioned body could forever out-distance the fleet dogs in a straight-away run.

Mile after mile was run before Old Snag was able to halt. He was atop a plateau, head high, ears and nose alertly searching. Suddenly his big body quivered as on a freshening breeze he caught strong man-scent, and other conflicting scents. Wheeling, his large eyes flashed as he saw a party of men and horses almost directly below.

Down there, a naturalist had a set of glasses clapped to his eyes. He was the head of the specimen-hunting party, and here was the big snag-tined buck he had heard so much about. He reached back toward his guide, who handed him a rifle. . . . But up on the plateau, Old Snag had heard a high-pitched whistle, and then the low baying of a hound. Rimrock Ewing had set loose his second dog.

Never had the chieftain buck been so confused, so alarmingly encircled by enemies, save at times in the winter when the gray wolves had swept around the deer band. But on such occasions, he could depend on help from other big bucks and does. Today, he was a lone fighter, handicapped by a young, ailing buck whose body gave off much fetid, uncontrolled fear scent. . . . There was no time to lose.

No naturalist could account for the acute wisdom of Old Snag's strange action. He wheeled and drove directly toward the approaching dog!

In a small glade, the chieftain buck came to a sharp halt. He heard brush crash. The hound creature was attacking. But Old Snag stood, and though he quivered in every nerve fibre, his fighting instincts sustained him in this desperate moment.

OLD SNAG'S big ears were turned back, cupped to quickly catch the sound of a threat at his rear, and as the oncoming dog struck from the brush, the big buck whipped to one side. Snarling, the dog recovered, wheeled, and leaped again. He could not hope to kill Old Snag. His work was to turn the buck, to drive him toward the man.

With seemingly small effort, the buck rose. The dog's fangs flashed at Old Snag's muzzle, but like lightning the old blacktail's forehoofs struck down. One hoof struck the dog in the nape of the neck, sending him down.

Grunting, snorting, Old Snag was in on him, cutting, stomping, slashing, with first one hoof and then the other! He was rising to deliver the final blow when a warning came from the yearling buck, The second hound was baying in from the rear.

Old Snag froze momentarily to listen, then blowing sharply he rose. wheeled in mid-leap, and ran the most dangerous trail of his life—his favorite path to the springs!

As he bounded clear of a clump of high wild rose scrub, he again heard that shrill whistling sound. It came from a point directly ahead. The baying of the running dog at his rear sounded louder, and Old Snag could hear the young buck blowing hard, in his fright, crashing brush.

Old Snag plunged into the aspen thick-

(Continued on page 126)

WHO'LL DIE FOR THE DEVIL'S CATTLE?

CHAPTER ONE

Blood on His Hands

"THAT nester's back in town, boss. And he's wearing a gun."

"Huh?" It took a moment for the words to sink into Rathbone Deddering's consciousness. He had been thinking of more pleasant things. Of the day he'd take over the rolling, un-

Wilson sprang from behind an upturned table.

By JAMES SHAFFER

Smashing Gun-Boss Novel

While the gunsmoke faded and the red mists closed in, Deddering wondered who had betrayed his fool-proof cattle empire scheme: The giant who broke men's backs with his hands, but couldn't talk. . . . The woman who had loved him once. . . . Or the deadly gunhawk Deddering himself had sent to Boothill?

counted acres of the Double Link ranch, and the day he'd take Margaret Janney as his wife. So for a moment, he just stared at the big burly figure of Suds McGuffey.

Then he became angry. Not at the nester. He didn't even know who Suds was talking about. He got mad at Suds for interrupting his pleasant thoughts.

"What nester?" he demanded peevishly. "What the hell you talking about? There's dozens of nesters in this country, and you tell me *that* nester is in town!"

Suds ran his tongue over his thick lips. There was nothing refined about Suds, Rath decided. He was big, brutish, and callously indifferent to other people's pain and suffering. But that, he thought, was exactly what made Suds valuable to him.

"I'm talking about Wilson," Suds went on. "He's the only man that ever took a beating and threatened to come back and kill you. Well, he's in town, and he's sporting a gun."

Rath Deddering's anger rose. "Is that what you come busting in here to tell me?" he snarled. "You've got your hands full—getting the boys ready for work tonight. And you waste time on this—this man named Wilson. Who the hell is he—" He broke off, remembering the name; remembering the circumstances.

It happened an afternoon about four months ago. He'd warned Wilson repeatedly about homesteading that water hole. But the fool had persisted; he'd even built a little sod shanty on the place.

Wilson had, Rath Deddering remembered, come close to making a laughing stock of him. That was the reason Deddering had chosen to go along with Suds and the boys that afternoon.

Rath didn't like horseback riding very much. A buggy was much more comfortable, and even more pleasant than the buggy was his well-furnished office. His office was the big front room on the second floor of his saloon. There were huge windows in the front of the office, where Rath Deddering could stand and watch everything that went on in Muleshoe.

Muleshoe! What a name! So common. So vulgar. And it was associated with an unpleasant memory, too. A few months ago, when he'd stood before the city council and suggested the name of the town be changed to Deddering, one or two council members had actually sniggered.

Well, they wouldn't snigger long! His plans were shaping up fast. The time for his final coup was only a few days off. After that, he'd hold the town in the palm of his hand. And the town wouldn't be called Muleshoe, either. Deddering. Dedderingville. Dedderingtown — they all sounded nice. He'd think about it later; right now—that damn nester.

Yes, he'd ridden out that afternoon with the boys. It was a pleasure to watch Suds work. Wilson had put up a fight, of course, quite a fight.

He nodded, remembering. Wilson had knocked two men out before the rest had pinned him down. And then Wilson's wife had rushed from the shanty and tried to pull the men off. She's gotten hit somehow. He remembered Wilson's scream when he saw his wife fall down. Kind of hard on a woman to be hit such a blow with her baby so near to being born. Well, the woman should have thought of that and stayed out of the fight!

"There he is, boss," Suds grunted, parting the heavy drapes at the window. Rath Deddering walked around his big mahogany desk and looked down on the street. Wilson was standing in front of the hardware store, talking to another seedy looking nester. He was turned so that Rath couldn't see the gun he was wearing, just the shell belt around his middle.

"All right," Rath said. "So you've told me. I know he's in town. Now get on with your work."

Suds licked his thick lips again. He shuffled his boots on the thick carpet and

shot a quick glance from under his beetling eyebrows.

"Mebbe me and the boys oughta stay in town tonight, Rath," he said.

"What for, you idiot?" he flared at him. Damn! Wouldn't Suds ever give up the idea of trying to think? "The Double Link herd is just where we want it," he went on, feeling nettled at the necessity of repeating to Suds something he already knew. "One more big raid will break the ranch. Hell, the whole set-up depends on this raid. When Double Link goes under, it'll drag the bank with it. And we take over the Double Link, and the bank, both."

"And Margaret Janney," Suds said with a leering grin. The grin, however, was short lived. Suds wriggled uncomfortably, the way he did when he was confronted with a problem he couldn't understand.

"I still think we hadn't ought to leave town," he muttered. "Things are—well, too damn quiet. Quiet, that is, to your face, but the minute your back is turned, there's a lot of muttering."

"And you think Wilson is the cause of it?" Rath's voice was heavy with scorn. Suds ripped his smelly hat from his head and rumpled his hair in a perplexed way.

"Wilson's wife died, you know," he said slowly. "The baby lived, but she died. Account of the licks she took, people say."

"And Wilson is in town to kill me for that?" he couldn't keep the scorn out of his voice.

"He's wearing a gun," Suds pointed out. "He never wore none before."

"He had a gun in his fist right after the fight," Deddering snapped. "And he didn't use it."

HE REMEMBERED with a glow of satisfaction, how he had taunted Wilson after the boys had worked him over. He remembered Wilson lying on the ground, threatening in a husky voice that he'd kill him, and how he had tossed Wilson one of his own fancy guns and urged him to try. Wilson had just looked at the gun lying there in the dust, mumbling how he didn't know anything about shooting guns.

"If Wilson had the guts to shoot, he would have shot that day," he told Suds. "He doesn't have the guts to use a gun."

"You got these nesters wrong, Rath," Suds said earnestly. "They're a different breed from cowpokes. Now if it'd been a cowpoke, he'd of made a dive for it when you throwed him a gun. He'd of died trying to git in a shot at you, anyhow."

Suds drew a long breath and continued. "But these damn nesters—they got patience. Patience to wait and learn things. Now you take Wilson, he's had time to learn something about using a gun—"

Damn! There went Suds trying to think

Here's how I proved to Mary...
THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE ALKA-SELTZER FOR FAST RELIEF FROM HEADACHE
I CAN'T GO, DARLING... THIS HEADACHE'S TOO MUCH FOR ME!
SURE YOU CAN! HERE, SEE HOW FAST ALKA-SELTZER MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER!
HERE WE GO! WE'RE OFF FOR FUN!
RIGHT, JIM! THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE ALKA-SELTZER FOR FAST RELIEF FROM HEADACHE
Alka-Seltzer
AT ALL DRUG STORES

again; trying to use his stupid head again. Nothing angered him more than that.

"You've got a job to do. Get the hell out of here and start doing it!" he snarled. "You think you're the only man that can gut-shoot Wilson if he's crazy enough to come at me?"

"I'm your partner," Suds said sullenly. "We started out together. I'd stick by you in a gun fight. The rest—they're just hired hands. You can't depend on 'em."

Rath laughed. "Quit worrying. Slick can gun Wilson down, if he tries anything. And there's Hauser, down at the bar. And the gamblers at the tables. I can count on them." He laughed again. "Hell, I might even let Dummy do the job."

"Dummy don't know how to use a gun," Suds said. "All he knows is to break a man's back with his fists."

"Mebbe I'd like to see Wilson go that way," Rath Deddering laughed. Then his voice became hard again. "Git going, Suds—and don't give me no more lip!"

Suds jammed his hat on his head and stomped out of the office. Rath grinned. Suds loved to stomp around when he was peeved, but the big thick rug deadened his footfalls in the office, and the big man couldn't express his anger.

He touched a match to a long, thin cheroot and regarded the street below. Wilson was nowhere in sight. Yes, now he was in sight, just coming out of the general store. Rath sucked his breath in sharply. Wilson was holding the door for Margaret Janney!

The cheroot crumpled in his soft white fingers, and his hand sought the fancy derringer in his vest pocket. Why, he'd kill the fool now! No, wait. Wilson had merely held the door open for Margaret. The girl thanked him with a bob of her head and started up the street toward her father's bank.

Rath smiled. He could drop in at the bank, meet Margaret and walk her home. He was still smiling as he walked to the mirror to straighten his vest and smooth his hair. He was slipping into his coat when Beulah came in.

"What'd you do to Suds? He's cussing up a storm." She noticed his preparation to go out. "Let's get a buggy and go for a ride. I'm about to suffocate—this blasted heat—"

"I've other business to attend to," he said shortly. He wondered what he'd ever seen in this woman. Her lips were too thick, and her voice grated on his nerves. And the paint she wore! He had a moment of inner revulsion.

Beulah's skirt swished as she crossed the room and flung the curtain back. "Oh, *she's* out, huh?" Her thick lips twisted in a sneer. "Promenading up and down with those dainty feet of hers. Keeping her eyes lowered, all ladylike—scairt to look a man in the face!"

"Shut up, you!" he rasped, drawing his hand back to slap. But he thought better of it. Just to touch Beulah was enough to get her cheap perfume all over you. He'd talked to Margaret Janney one day with it on him, and he'd seen her nose wrinkle as she caught the scent.

He saw the murderous lights flicker in Beulah's eyes as he picked up his hat. Well, what of it? She didn't expect a man like him to tie himself to her kind for life, did she? Beulah could make her own damn living. She could deal any game in the house—and do it right, too. He started for the door, leaving her standing there. Then he remembered Wilson.

That damn nester! It was annoying, most annoying to have such a man in town. Not that he was afraid of Wilson—the poor fool! But just the same—he turned to Beulah.

"Go down and get Slick," he barked. "Tell him to meet me at the side entrance. No—wait a minute. Tell Slick to stay behind me. About fifty feet."

She started to retort, and he clenched his fist. She saw that fist, all right. His

knuckles might not be as hard as Suds', but they were hard enough to shred her lips and blacken her eyes. That she knew from experience!

"I'll tell him," she grunted and swept out. He followed her to the hallway and watched her descend the stairs to the main floor below. The sight of her white shoulder almost sickened him. That dress was certainly cut low. Margaret Janney would never be seen in such a dress.

Remembrance of the girl brought a quickening of his pulse beat. He smiled as he took the other stairway and came out the side entrance of the saloon. He walked to the sidewalk and waited. A moment later, Slick came out the front door, wearing that silly, perpetual smile on his lean face. Deddering nodded briefly and started for the bank.

CHAPTER TWO

Killer's Crew

FIVE men were waiting for Suds at the far end of the bar when he came down the steps. He'd given strict orders for them to lay off the drinking. Now he broke his own orders. He crooked a finger at Hauser, the head barkeep, and called for a bottle of the stuff from under the bar.

Hauser's thin face was expressionless as he slid the bottle and glass along the bar. Suds sloshed the glass half full and gulped it down. He waited for the belch, made it a loud one, then poured another drink.

"We goin' anyhow, huh?" one of the five asked.

"Yeah, the damn fool wouldn't listen to me," Suds grunted.

"Me, I think you been smoking loco weed anyhow, Suds," another of the men spoke. "That Double Link herd is right where we want it, and old man Bonner is letting his hands come into town for a night's fun. Why shouldn't we knock the herd off, huh?"

Suds started to explain, then swore instead. These lunkheads wouldn't understand. They were as pigheaded as the boss. Rath Deddering! His lips formed the words soundlessly, as he felt the liquor warm his guts.

Rath had always figured him for a dumb fool. Rath had always cussed him out when he'd tried to tell him something. He'd always told Suds he didn't know how to think, and to leave the thinking to him.

Well, maybe Rath was right. Suds couldn't think up all the angles that Rath could. Even after Rath had thought out some sly trick for them to pull, it took Suds a long time to get it straight.

Yeah, maybe he was dumb when it come to plotting things. Suds downed another big drink, felt it set fire to the first one already down. Maybe he wasn't smart about plotting, but by hell he was smart when it come to fighting.

Fancy britches Rath could set in his fancy office and plot things out, but it was ole Suds that took it from there. It was ole Suds that did the lead slinging. And it was Suds that knew when a bunch of men would fight, and when they wouldn't fight.

Suds knew how to crowd a man into fighting before he was ready. And he could gauge just when a man was going to work himself into fighting, and be ready to draw when the man did.

Aw'right, so Rath wanted him to get the herd anyhow. Rath wouldn't listen to his talk about that Wilson gent. Rath hadn't even given him a chance to tell what he knew about Wilson—to tell that Wilson had been working on Charley Opper's little ranch these past months. And ever'body knowed that old Charley Opper was an old time gunslinger. All stove up with rheumatism now, old Charley was. Take him five minutes to lift a gun outta

leather. But old Charley knew all the tricks, and Charley could teach a man.

By hell, that was good liquor! Made a man think. Why, it fixed a man so's he could plot out things as good as Rath. Well, maybe not *that* good, but plenty good enough.

He knew, for instance, that this town of Muleshoe was gitting mighty sick of Rath. And that a lot of folks that simpered and grinned to Rath's face, were welcoming that Wilson gent to town with open arms.

Now, just supposing. . . . He sloshed another drink into his glass and started to lift it. A heavy hand fell on his arm. He started to fling the hand off, then saw that it was Dummy.

Dummy was bigger than Suds by four inches in height, and about forty pounds in weight. Dummy pointed to the glass and shook his head, at the same time making a gutteral sound in his throat.

Dummy couldn't talk. He wasn't much good with a gun, and he couldn't ride a horse worth a cent. Dummy couldn't do nothing much—except break a man's back with his two big hands. He could lift Suds in his arms and carry him like a baby.

And Dummy, Suds knew, intended carrying out Rath's orders to see that none of the men got drunk. He grinned at Dummy and poured the drink in the spittoon. Dummy grinned back, and returned to the pool table.

"Git the horses ready," Suds told his men. "I'll meet you behind the livery in ten minutes."

He watched them troop out and then mounted the stairs to the second floor. The thick carpet deadened his footfalls as he entered the big office and crossed to the iron safe in the corner.

It took a few minutes for his befuddled mind to remember the combination, but he managed finally, and the door swung open. His breath was coming fast as his hairy hand drew out the cash box. It wasn't a big box; he and Rath both liked to keep money in big bills. A man could carry a lot of money, when every bill was worth a thousand bucks!

He counted out half of the money, then walked over to the desk. He'd write Rath a note. "Our partnership is done. I took my haff the money." And he'd sign his name. He found a pencil, licked it and started to write.

Hell's fire! It would take him an hour to write that note. And how did a man spell partnership, anyhow? Besides, if he left, Rath would still own the saloon. Suds would take all the cash, and Rath could have all the rest. That was a fair trade. And it would save him from writing the note.

He cleaned the cash box out, slid it back in the safe and shut the door. He stuffed his money belt full, and the rest he put in his pockets, then left the office. His mind wasn't too befuddled to remember the side door, and he went out that way quietly and hurried toward the back of the livery.

RATH DEDDERING paused once on his way to the bank. That was in front of the millinery shop, where he could see his reflection in the shop's window. He regarded himself critically, seeing that his vest was straight, his hat at just the jaunty angle, and that no dust was on his boots.

The fancy little two shot derringer made an unsightly bulge in his vest pocket, and for a moment he thought of tossing the gun to Slick. Then he remembered that Wilson was in town, and thought better of it.

If Wilson was fool enough to try to get him, he might want to put a slug in the man himself. After, of course, Slick had put a heavy .45 bullet in Wilson's guts.

He glanced back down the street. Slick was lounging against a store awning post,

his thumbs hooked in his shell belt. Slick's grin went a little wider, showing even white teeth.

Slick was a handsome devil. Almost as handsome as himself. Of course the scar on Slick's cheek marred his looks somewhat. That scar grew white and sort of twitched when Slick got mad, or just before he had a killing to do.

Rath shuddered. Thank goodness he'd had sense enough to take on Suds and Dummy to do the rough stuff. He wouldn't want his face scarred up like Slick's.

His eyes drifted farther down the street, and he saw Wilson come out on the hotel porch. The man started to sink into one of the chairs, then spotted Rath on the street and leaned against the porch railing, watching him.

Rath flicked a glance at Slick, saw that the man had his eye on Wilson. The nester saw it too, and made no further move. Rath shrugged and continued on to the bank.

Margaret was talking to her father over by the teller's cage when he entered. She looked around quickly, and he saw the blush creep into her cheeks as she dropped her glance to the floor.

Her dress was modestly high over her shoulders, but even so it couldn't hide the full rounded curves of her. And her face —though there wasn't a bit of paint on it —drew his eyes like a magnet.

He felt a hot tingle start at his toes and run clean up his body. What a wife she'd make for a man! She was no dance hall frump. This was the real thing. He suppressed a smile.

He would make a good husband. He knew how to handle women. He'd had enough practice.

"Hi, Rath." Silas Janney's reedy voice broke the silence. He frowned at the man, remembering that he'd hinted strongly that it would be better if Janney learned to call him 'mister.'

Well, Janney would learn that, in good time. By tomorrow, Double Link would be bankrupt. The biggest ranch in the country—helpless! And Rath knew that Janney had over-extended the bank's resources, trying to pull Double Link out of a financial mess.

When Double Link went under, it would drag the bank with it. And who in town, but he, had the money to cover? By tomorrow, Double Link, the bank—the whole damn town—would be his.

"Did you want to see me, Rath?" Janney's voice went on. "Let's go back to my office."

"Don't let me detain you, dad," Margaret said. "I was just leaving."

"Then I'm leaving, too," he said gallantly, sweeping his hat off. "I'll walk you home, Mar—Miss Janney." Damn! He still fumbled when he tried to call her by name.

"Oh, don't bother," her answer was

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very quick. "I wouldn't think of troubling you. You must have business with dad."

"It'll have to wait," he told her. "It's not half as important as squiring such a lovely lady home."

He swept his hat off and bowed. As he straightened, he saw that the girl and her father had been exchanging glances. Smoldering anger lay deep in Silas Janney's eyes. So the old fool didn't like the idea of him marrying Margaret, eh? Well, he'd get over it. He'd get over it, or spend the rest of his life in prison!

"Thank you, Mister Deddering," the girl said simply, and moved toward the door. He followed her out and had to stretch his stride to keep up with her. When he did, he took hold of her elbow possessively, noticing that she didn't draw away, as she had done before.

That was good, he thought. She was learning. Fast. There was no doubt of it; he knew how to handle his women. He cut his glance around, saw that Slick was where he should be. And at the same instant, he heard a quick rumble of horse's hoofs, and saw a cloud of dust lift from the rear of the livery stable. Suds was on his way.

That was good. Everything was good. He had to suppress a chuckle. Never had one of his plans gone wrong yet. And he didn't intend for them to go wrong now.

HE MADE light conversation. About the weather. About how the drought would cut the calf crop down, and how it was a shame that old man Bonney didn't know enough about ranching to make his big Double Link ranch pay.

The girl answered him in monosyllables. A quick yes or no, or a bob of her head was all. It nettled him a little. True, a woman shouldn't speak until spoken to, and she should agree with her husband. But on the other hand, she'd have to learn to humor his moods.

When he was in a talking mood, she'd have to learn to talk. That was all there was to it. He sighed. Oh, well, he'd have plenty of time to teach her—

"If you'll excuse me," Margaret Janney said, "I just remembered something I need from the general store. I may be a few minutes—and I wouldn't want to ask you to wait. Good day, Mister Deddering."

Quickly, and as light as a feather, she disengaged her arm and mounted the creaky wooden steps to the general store. He could only stand and stare after her—unless he wanted to run up the steps and catch up.

And he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't run after any woman. Oh, she had things to learn all right. He swore softly under his breath and continued walking down the street.

He had no reason to keep walking down the street, but it would look foolish as hell to stalk back to the saloon right now. It would show the town that the only reason he was out was to chase after that fool woman. And the town knew he didn't chase women. They came to him.

He walked around the block to soothe his nerves. His clothes were hot and uncomfortable in the suffocating heat of late afternoon. Slick tagged along behind, and he could hear the man humming a tune.

Rath reached the main street again and started for the saloon, feeling more soothed. After all, Suds was on his way. Everything was going just as he had plan— He stopped short, his whole body growing hot with indignation.

Down at the general store, Margaret Janney was coming out—with Wilson! Slick's light, patent leather boots made a slithering sound on the rough plank sidewalk as the gunman drew alongside.

"That Wilson gent don't have to hold her arm, does he?" Slick always seemed just about to chuckle when he spoke. There were times when it infuriated Rath, and this was one of the times.

"She just sticks her arm through his," Slick went on. "Lookit her laugh wouldja? Just like a dance hall floozy gitting some cowpoke to buy her a drink!"

"Get the hell out of here!" Rath snarled. Slick's handsome face jerked around. For just a moment, that scar on his cheek jumped a little and turned a shade paler. Then the old mocking grin came back on his face.

"All through for the day, huh?" Slick grinned. "Sure. Wilson ain't gonna start shooting while that filly's hanging on his arm that way—take it easy, take it easy, boss. I'm going."

He flicked a glance toward the saloon and lifted the heavy gunbelt, to let air reach his body where the gunbelt had been.

"Be glad to get out of these hot things and cool off, anyhow," he murmured as he moved off. Rath paid scant attention as Slick moved down the sidewalk and entered the side door of the saloon. Even as he stepped through the door, Slick unbuckled his gunbelt and threw his coat back.

Rath stood rooted to the spot, watching the girl and the nester walk gaily down the street. Gaily! The word rubbed him. But that was the right word, he thought. It was the only word that fitted.

Where had she met that fool Wilson? The nester hadn't been to town since the day the boys had worked him over. As a matter of fact, Rath had figured Wilson'd left the country. He'd been rather surprised to hear that he was still around. But where had Margaret—?

He remembered now. Many times, these past months, she'd taken trips out to various ranches. Stayed three or four days each trip, he remembered. All of those trips, he'd bet a dollar, had been to old Charley Opper's place. Suds said that's where Wilson had worked. He swore and started down the street, not seeing the dog that slunk along the sidewalk at the heels of a small boy.

His polished boot hit the cur and the animal leaped sideways, its hackles rising and a deep growl sounding in its throat.

"Don't kick Prince, Mister Deddering," the boy said shrilly. "Price'll bite you. He's kinda mean—"

"BITE me, will he!" Rath Deddering snarled. He drew his boot back and kicked at the dog's bony ribs. A piercing yelp of outraged pain came from the dog as the kick sent it toppling backwards. It floundered for a moment, then came to its feet, spitting and snarling.

"Prince! Prince!" the kid darted forward to grab the dog, but the brute eluded its young master. Fangs bared, and growling, it leaped for Rath. He kicked just as the dog snapped at his leg. There was a rip as his pants leg gave way, and he felt a sharp pain in his leg.

He kicked again, ignoring the shrill entreaties of the boy. The kick knocked the dog off balance, but the brute scrambled to his feet and rushed again. Rath Deddering cursed and reached for his derringer.

"No, Mr. Deddering, no!" the kid squealed in terror. "Prince didn't mean no harm, Mr. Deddering—please—"

The derringer barked. The slug jerked the dog's head back; stopping its rush. The dog looked at the boy. Its legs began to wobble.

Fool dog, Rath thought. Looking at the kid like he thinks the kid can help him now. As if anybody could help the brute now. Look at him, trying to lick the kid's hand. He lifted the derringer for another shot, then swore in vexation as the boy flung himself forward and gathered the dog in his arms.

"Prince—look at me! Are you hurted bad, Prince? Don't die, fella—"

Rath smiled coldly. The way the fool kid had his arms around the dog's neck, he'd choke him to death before the bullet killed him.

"Prince—" the kid was still slobbering. "Prince—don't die—we'll go hunt rabbits—like you wanted to right now—Prince-Pu-Pu—"

Rath stepped around the kid and started down the street, then stopped. The racket had caused people to turn and stare at him. But that wasn't what caught his attention. He was used to the town staring at him.

Down the street, Wilson had turned and was walking toward him, and for the first time, Rath got a good look at the way Wilson wore his gun.

The gun wasn't belted high and awkward, like a nester was supposed to wear his gun. It swung low on his thigh, and he could see the way it rode that it was tied down. Wilson wasn't clumping along toward him in a nester's awkward gait, either. He was walking on the balls of his feet, his whole body leaning forward; arms at his sides, but not swinging. It was the way Suds walked—or Slick—when they were walking forward to kill a man. . . . .

Frantic thoughts flashed through Rath's head.

Charley Opper—old time gunslinger—Charley had killed a dozen men—been in lots of fights—Wilson had been working for him—Slick had taken his guns off as he entered the saloon—Suds was gone—the side door of the saloon was fully fifty yards away—maye there was still time to reach it—

Margaret Janney's voice cut through his thoughts. "Jeff! Jeff! No! Listen to me, Jeff!"

Jeff, that was Wilson's first name. Rath saw the girl pick up her skirt and run after Wilson. He saw her grab Wilson's arm, and jerk him to a stop. She was talking to him. He listened a moment, then shook his head. He jerked his arm free and started walking once more. The girl ran after him and grabbed his arm once again.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Men Can Kill

RATH moved quickly. He didn't exactly run, but it was almost a trot as he went down the street. Wilson was still trying to jerk loose from the girl as he stepped off the sidewalk. Another few steps, and he was around the corner of the saloon; three more steps and he was through the side door. He slammed it shut and leaned against it a moment, gulping big lungfuls of air.

Then he thought of Slick. Damn him! Where had he been when he needed him? Why hadn't he been there? He started up the stairs, two at a time.

"Hey, boss." It was Hauser, the head bartender. More than a barkeep, really. Hauser kept an eye on things generally in the saloon. He was the only man Rath really trusted. And they both knew why he trusted Hauser. One word from Rath, and Hauser would go back to that penitentiary. Hauser didn't like to think of it.

"What is it?" he rapped as Hauser came out of the saloon and into the little hallway where the side stairway was.

"Time to open the tables, boss," Hauser said in that flat voice of his. "Got customers already."

Rath nodded. He hadn't realized it was so late. Almost dark. He told Hauser to follow, and led the way to his office. Hauser waited outside as he was ordered till he had worked the combination of the safe. He called Hauser as he lifted out big bags of gold coin.

"Tell Rusty he's got to do better on that black jack table," he barked. "His take ain't been good lately."

"Rusty's gitting rheumatism in his finger joints," Hauser said quickly. "Can't work a deck so good—"

"Tell him if he can't rig a deck good enough, we'll get somebody else for his table," he said coldly, and passed the bags

to Hauser. The man nodded and went out. Rath went back to the safe and started to swing the door shut. Then he noticed that the cash box wasn't locked tight. He snatched at it, trying to remember how he'd failed to lock it. It was awfully light. He flung the lid back and stared at the bottom of the box. . . .

Suds had robbed him! Taken every penny of cash and run like the cheap damn crook that he was. He flung his hat and coat off, pacing the room savagely. He stalked to the door. Slick knew where that herd was—and Slick was good with a rifle—

The thought of Slick brought back the thought of Wilson. Wilson! Why that damned fool had actually started for him; had actually acted as if he meant to shoot!

And Margaret! He started to curse her loudly for having anything to do with Wilson, then he remembered that it was her hanging onto Wilson's arm that had given him time enough to reach the side door. He knew the girl hadn't done it for him; but the result had been the same. She'd saved him from a nasty situation.

No, Suds would have to wait. In a way, he was glad Suds was gone; glad it had worked out this way. The big fool was beginning to get on his nerves. This way, Suds had paid himself off, by taking the cash. Suds didn't know about the small box he kept under his bed.

No, let Suds go. It was good riddance. But Wilson? That matter couldn't be delayed. He walked down the hall toward Slick's room. Best give Slick his orders to kill Wilson right now. Do the job quick and get it over with.

Slick wasn't in his room. He swore and started back up the hall, then he heard Slick's laugh coming from Beulah's room. He flung the door open.

The two of them were cuddling on the big satin sofa by the window. Beulah went white under her paint at the sight of him and scrambled away from Slick.

"HIYA, boss," Slick drawled, making no move to get up. A blinding flash of anger ripped through Rath. Choking back a curse, he leaped into the room and rushed toward her. She tried to duck, but he caught her. He jerked her face around and slammed his fist full into her thick lips, knocking the scream back down her throat.

"I'll teach you—you—" He drew back to swing again, and Slick grabbed his arm.

"Take it easy, boss," Slick said, and for once the grin was off his face. The scar on his cheek jumped a little. "Ain't no call to slug her that way."

"I'll do what I damned please with her!" Rath snarled furiously.

"I got a right to have a boy friend!" Beulah screeched. "You don't never look at me no more! I git lonesome. I got a right to have me a man. You're always traipsing after that stuck-up thing—"

Rath slugged her again. Beulah yelped with pain and went down. Something landed solidly behind Rath's ear. The room swam dizzily for a moment, and when it settled, he was surprised to find himself on his hands and knees. How did he get here—? Slick! Damn him! No man could hit Rath Deddering and get away with it. He lurched to his feet.

"You got you a woman, and you were through with Beulah," Slick grunted. "Now let us alone, or I'll bop you again—"

He would do it, too! Rath thought wildly. He backed toward the door.

"That's better, boss," Slick was his old grinning self again. "Ain't no call for us to fight."

Rath smiled now. Because he was over by the door, and he could hear giant footfalls padding softly up the steps. Dummy! But Slick didn't know that, and Slick grinned back. Beulah's whimpers were beginning to grow still.

The footfalls reached the door. Rath flung it open.

"Git 'im, Dummy! Kill Slick!"

It was laughable, really comical, the way Slick's eyes bugged out at the sight of Dummy. Because Slick had left his guns off! The scar on Slick's cheek was jumping a mile a minute now, and it was white as a paper. Dummy moved through the door. His big hands went out straight, reaching for Slick.

"No, Rath—for God's sake—no!" Beulah sobbed. He flung a glance at her. She had her fists jammed against her teeth to keep from screeching, and she'd bitten through the skin. A trickle of blood dripped down her knuckles.

"Boss! Boss!" Slick's voice was a whimper. "Call 'im off!"

Rath laughed. That scar on Slick's cheek. It was comical, the way it jumped. Slick jumped too. He jumped clean over the sofa, ducked and twisted away from Dummy's grasp. But Slick wouldn't elude Dummy for long. This room wasn't big, and Dummy made sure Slick couldn't reach the door.

He tried, though. Made a darn good try, Rath thought. Slick feinted in one direction, then whirled fast as a cat, and streaked for the door. Dummy throated some sounds out of his mouth. His big hand closed over Slick's shoulder.

Slick twisted and tried to break free, panting hard. He swung his fists at Dummy's face, but the giant shook the blows off. Dummy threw Slick into the air and caught him in a bear hug as he came down.

Slick struggled. He got a hand under Dummy's chin and tried to pry the big man's head back. Dummy shook his head and snorted. The muscles stood out on his arms. Slick's face began to turn purple. He twisted a glance toward Beulah.

"Save me — kid — save me —" he croaked.

Beulah gasped and raced toward her bureau. Rath paid no attention. He was fascinated by the sight of Dummy and Slick. The man's backbone was beginning to crackle now. Dummy was squeezing harder. Slick had almost quit struggling—

"Hey!" he yelled at Beulah, but it was too late. She was running across the room, with a little pistol in her hand.

Slick's eyes were dull with entreaty and pain, as Beulah reached the pair. Rath started for her, but she was too quick. She pressed the muzzle hard against Dummy's back and fired.

THE gun made hardly any noise at all. Just a slight pop, as it went off. Rath reached Beulah, but there was nothing to do now. Beulah had dropped the gun and was staggering backwards, watching the thin trickle of blood dribbling down Dummy's shirt.

The giant coughed, like a man with a dry throat. He coughed again, and this time, the cough gurgled. His huge arms relaxed their grip on Slick, and he turned to face Rath, a look of puzzled pain in his eyes. They reminded Rath of the eyes of the dog he'd shot.

Slick fell slowly out of Dummy's grasp. He hit the floor limply, and his arms and legs flopped feebly for a moment, then became still. Dummy started to cough again, and this time blood rushed out of his mouth. He took one tottering step, then fell with a thump that shook the room.

"Damn you—I'll kill you for this!" Rath breathed. He felt in his vest for the derringer, jerked it free. Beulah was staring at him, but there was no fear in her eyes. They were dull from the shock of what she'd seen.

"Deddering!"

The sound of his name brought him to a stop. He cocked an ear and listened. The name was repeated. The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Not until the man yelled a third time. Then he knew. It was Wilson!

"I'm coming in after you, Deddering!"

Wilson called from the street. Rath ran to the window, then swore as he remembered Beulah's room was on the side of the building.

He whirled and ran into his office, the derringer clutched in his hand. He jerked the curtain aside and peered down.

"Deddering!" Wilson called again, and then realized that the man was standing under the awning in front of the saloon. The awning was made of wood. He rushed out of the office, to the stairs.

"Hauser! Hauser! Do you hear me!"

"Yeah, boss," Hauser's voice was the same as it always was. He breathed easier for a moment. Of course. Of course everything would be all right. What the devil was he getting panicky for.

"Kill that fool Wilson if he comes in here!" he yelled at Hauser. He realized that his voice was husky and shaky, even though there was nothing to be afraid of. "Kill him—you hear?"

He waited a moment, but Hauser didn't answer. Everything was deathly quiet down in the saloon.

"Hauser!" His voice was almost a shriek. There was a light laugh behind him. He whirled. Beulah!

"Why don't you go down and kill him yourself, Rath?"

"Damn it, I'll kill you!" he snarled, bringing the derringer up. She had gotten over her shock, and the sight of the gun muzzle inches from her face, didn't seem to bother her a bit. She even smiled a little.

"Go ahead and shoot," she laughed. "There's only one shell left. Remember? It took one shell to kill that dog. And you never carry extra shells. They make your pockets bulge—"

He stared at her, his lips working, trying to form words that wouldn't come. She was right. He'd forgotten. There was only one shell in the derringer.

"Hauser!" he called again. There was silence below for a moment, then Wilson answered quietly.

"Hauser's gone," Wilson said. "I told him I was coming after you and he decided not to stay and help you."

Hauser gone! It—it was impossible. Why—why that meant that there was no one he could depend on. The gamblers? They all hated him, and he knew it. He heard Wilson start across the floor.

"Ain't nobody down here but me,"

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Wilson called. "If you ain't coming down —I'm coming up."

He wanted to scream, but he couldn't make a sound. This couldn't be happening to him. It *couldn't*. He'd always been able to think his way out of any jam before. And by hell, he could now.

Wilson didn't know Slick was dead. He didn't know about Slick and Dummy lying in Beulah's room staring at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. He whirled away from the stairs and raced into Beulah's room.

Slick wasn't very big, and it wasn't much of a job to lift him to his feet and hold him erect. He held Slick up with one hand, and clutched the derringer with the other. Wilson would shoot at Slick first—and while he was shooting at Slick's corpse, he'd plant that one bullet.

He was at the head of the stairs now. He took a deep breath and tried to make his voice sound natural.

"Let's go, Slick," he said, and forced a laugh. "I'll even give you first shot."

HE started down the steps. Slick's dragging feet bumped horribly on each step as they went down. He heard Wilson move across the room; heard the man mutter a prayer. Then someone yelled from outside.

"Wilson, dang it! Lemme come in there and help you out! You ain't no match for the two of 'em. I'll take Slick and you take Deddering—" Rath recognied the voice of old man Bonney, owner of Double Link. Wilson seemed to be considering Bonney's offer. Rath became wild with despair. He couldn't let Bonney come in to help Wilson! He wouldn't have a chance then. Then he laughed. He knew what to do.

"You'd better git going and save your herd, Bonney!" Rath yelled. "Suds and the boys are out rustling it right now. Better get going!"

He heard Bonney curse; heard Wilson yell at the old man to ride and save his cattle. Bonney argued a moment, then gave in. A moment later, a band of horsemen rode out of town.

He was at the turn of the steps now. He looked at Slick's dead face. It had that same old grin on it. It looked natural enough. It would fool Wilson, he knew. One more step.

"Never mind about shooting at Slick, Wilson." Beulah called. "Slick's dead, he's—"

He saw Wilson spring into sight from behind an upturned card table. The gun in Wilson's hand seemed part of him. It was lifting, but very slowly! Wild hope surged through Rath. Wilson hadn't learned gunspeed after all.

He flung teh derringer up, and fired.

He felt nothing, but suddenly his right arm began to sag, the gun dangling from his fingers. He tried to lift the arm, but instead of lifting, the arm began dropping.

What was wrong? Was he drunk? Was this a dream? No, it wasn't a dream. It was real. There was Wilson, smoke dribbling from his gun muzzle. Wilson had fired, but he must have missed, because he had felt nothing—no—wait! He did feel something.

His whole body felt numb. Then there was a slight, sharp pain in his stomach. He tried to draw his breath, and that little pain in his stomach spread like wildfire to every part of his body, roared through his flesh like pounding thunder, drowning out all other noise, beating him to his knees. . . .

He was still alive when Silas Janney bent over him. "Never knowed it to fail," Janney's voice seemed to come from far away, "They all get too big for their britches. . . ."

The voice got farther and farther away as Rath sank deeper and deeper into a never ending blackness. . . .

THE END

Ma went into action. . . .

By
J. WALTON DOYLE

Brand Your Own Man!

IT ISN'T every woman who would, and single-handed at that, take on the chore of fighting back at a range-hungry killer and his gang of gunslicks because she loved a certain man. In fact, Ma McKarkle didn't think that she would, either . . . until it happened.

Ma was Hank Dinbro's housekeeper.

A woman worth her salt always gets her man, Ma McKarkle figured. . . . Whether she has to snatch him from the branding fire of another gal — or from under the snarling guns of an army of range-hungry killers!

Had been for ten years. She was a big woman, mostly wide-ways, and hefted close to what a side of beef would. But a lot of that heft wasn't fat. You could tell that by watching her when she took a wash tub full of water to the back door and heaved it out with the same ease another woman would a pan full.

Just what she saw in Hank Dinbro nobody knew, for Hank wasn't much on looks. Kind of a skinny jigger with an over-size mustache that made him look a little top-heavy. But the fact remained, she was secretly in love with him.

The whole thing might have come to a head quicker if Hank hadn't been so danged tight-mouthed. But he never mentioned to Ma that in the past week he'd lost a considerable number of steers; or that three of his winter haystacks had mysteriously burned; or about the drift fence along the north side of his Anchored-O grass being torn down. Might have been better if Hank had got it off his chest instead of keeping it bottled up inside himself.

Hank Dinbro didn't need to have a letter written to him to know what was going on. Those disappearing steers, the burned haystacks and downed fences made pretty clear hand-writing on the wall.

Joad Murdock was getting ready to move in and take over the Anchored-O. By force. That was the only way Joad knew how to get what he wanted.

That method seemed to work pretty good for him, for in the four years Joad had been in the Hackberry country, he had, with the aid of his gunslicks, forced all of the ranchers in the valley to "git up an' git". Several of them "got" feet first because they talked back to Joad.

Hank's Anchored-O lay at the foot of the valley. And now Joad wanted it. Stealing Hank's cattle, burning his haystacks and ripping up his drift fences was just his way of hinting about what he wanted . . . and intended to take.

Like a boil, the thing had to come to a head sooner or later. It did, sooner. Saturday morning.

Ma and Hank had made their regular bi-monthly trip to town for supplies. Ma had bought the groceries and loaded them into the wagon, while Hank was up the street at the barbership getting a haircut.

Ma was through with her end of the business before Hank, so she crossed the street and sat down on the bench in the little square in front of the courthouse.

There was a big cottonwood right behind the bench, and the coolness of its shade was a blessing to anyone who had just made a fifteen mile ride across near-desert, like Ma. Right in front of the bench was an old-time cannon.

Ma pulled off her shoes, leaned back with a sigh and put her feet up on the cannon, the cool iron feeling good to her tired, hot feet. She sat there like that maybe fifteen minutes, kind of drowsing.

Pretty soon, Hank got through at the barber shop and came down the street for his glass of beer at the Oasis Saloon. The Oasis was directly across the street from the square and Ma saw him go in, but didn't think anything about it, knowing his habits.

But when Joad Murdock suddenly stepped out of the livery barn and walked up the street, Ma came wide awake in a hurry.

Joad stopped in front of the Oasis and stood there, tense-like, as if waiting for someone. And Ma kind of held on to her breath and shivered at the little prickly feeling that was walking up and down her backbone. She had a reason.

THREE of Joad Murdock's gunnies had sauntered out of the livery barn and followed Joad. One of them stopped before he reached Joad and leaned up against the saloon. The second one went on by, stopped and stood near the farther corner of the building. The third crossed the

street and leaned over the hitch rail there, looking back across toward the door of the Oasis.

Ma had been around, and she knew the ways of men. She didn't need to be told that Joad Murdock had set his death trap there in the street and was calmly waiting for Hank to walk into it.

In the next five seconds she was up off the bench and clear into the middle of the street, little clouds of dust swirling up between the spraddle toes of her big feet.

Joad didn't see her coming because he was busy watching the batwings in front of the saloon. They had just swung back. A man stepped out on to the walk.

Joad stiffened. The man halted, his left hand still holding back one of the batwings. It was Hank Dinbro. He stood there, the color seeping from his face, leaving it chalky looking.

The suddenness of it stopped Ma. She involuntarily closed her eyes, waited for the gunshots to *whang* through the quiet, tense air.

But Joad Murdock didn't feel like shooting . . . yet. Like a cat torturing a mouse, he wanted to play with Hank a little, make him squirm.

Joad said, "Mebbe you don't know a hint when you see one!" His voice was nasty-mean.

Ma could hear Hank swallow clear over where she stood. Hank's eyes left Joad's for a fraction of a second and made a quick, three-cornered jerk that took in the gunslicks hemming him in. Then he shook his head slowly.

"No, Murdock," he said, and his voice was soft but tight. "I ain't drawin' to a stacked deck."

Murdock was a big man, big and wide, and now he kind of hunched himself over a little so his eyes were level with Hank's. "Why damn yore yeller hide," he growled. the corners of his slit-like mouth turning down a little farther. "You ain't got the guts of a—"

"Hey . . . Moordock!" It was Ma's voice, high and shrill.

She was moving towards Joad, a wild light in her eyes. She didn't know just what she was going to do, but anything was better than standing there watching Hank get goaded into drawing, then getting cut down in cold blood.

Murdock's head jerked around. His right arm worked like it was hitched to his head, moving up in a blurred arc from his side.

To Ma, the hole in the end of his gun looked big enough to hide in. The sight of it stopped her like she had run into a board fence.

The scared look that had jumped to Joad's face drained away when he saw who it was. His lips stayed turned down at the corners, and his eyes sneered at Ma.

"Female, fat and foolish!" he said, and it sounded like he'd been gargling broken glass. He swung the end of his gun up slightly. "This will teach you not to go 'round stickin' yore snoot where it ain't wanted!" He pulled the trigger.

The gunshot blast bounced off the buildings, died away. The bunch of artificial cherries on Ma's hat fell away where the slug had clipped the stem. They cascaded off the wide hat brim, dropped down past her face like big drops of blood, kicking up tiny spurts of dust as they hit the ground.

Right there, Joad Murdock made one of the big mistakes of his life. That hat was Ma's pride and glory. She had cherished it fifteen years now, and figured it was good for another fifteen. Every so often she would get it out and polish the imitation cherries with a mixture of goose grease and snake oil she kept in a little jar. It made them look appetizing, even if their smell wasn't.

It took Ma two full seconds to realize the enormity of Joad's crime. Then she went into action. She hauled off and whopped him alongside the jaw with her

open hand and it sounded like she'd hit him with a ball bat.

It must have felt the same way, for Joad's head snapped over to one side so far it's a wonder it didn't break right off his neck.

JOAD staggered sideways, trying hard to stay on his feet. Ma reached out and twisted the gun out of his hand, put the heel of her other hand in his face and shoved.

The next instant Joad's heels were in the air where his head had been. He hit the boardwalk on his face and skidded along for ten feet before he came to a stop.

The gun still in her hand, Ma reached out, grabbed Hank's arm with her left and yanked him across the street so fast he had to run to keep up. For her size, Ma was no slouch at getting places.

She pushed him up into the wagon, ran over and picked up her shoes, unhitched the team and climbed in beside Hank, the wagon sagging dangerously under her weight.

Back across the street, Murdock was sitting on the walk, pawing at his face like a wild man as he tried to get out the worst of the splinters. The three gunslicks just stood where they were, their mouths wide open and an I-don't-believe-it look in their eyes as they watched the wagon head down the street.

When they left town and hit the narrow, rutted road, Hank took a quick peek at Ma from the corner of his eye. But Ma didn't notice. She was looking straight ahead, the reins tight in her hands, her eyes blazing like twin bonfires on a dark night.

"Git oop! Ye turkle-gaited spawn o' the deevil!" she bellowed at the team.

They hadn't gone far when a rider tore up behind them at a breakneck gallop. Ma turned and saw that it was one of Joad Murdock's gunnies who had been back there in the street. She picked up the pistol from the seat beside her, held it in readiness.

Hank said, "You better let me handle this."

Ma snorted disgustedly without taking her eyes from the approaching rider.

The ranny saw the gun, but came on, one hand held high. There was something white fluttering from it. He rode up alongside, leaned out and stuck the white thing toward Hank. Hank grabbed it, and the rider veered away, swung his horse around and headed back toward town.

Hank looked down at the piece of paper in his hand for a long second, then slowly unfolded it. His face seemed to grow longer as he read it, then he crumbled it quickly and stuck it into his shirt pocket.

"Well. . . ?" Ma said, fair burning with curiosity.

"It ain't well," Hank said, looking straight out over the team.

"Losh, mon," Ma said. "Ye mean ye wi' no be tellin' me whot's in the writin'?"

"None a yore business," Hank told her, his voice sounding like he'd made up his mind about something.

"Weel I like thot!" Ma stormed in a voice that was just the opposite of her words.

But Hank wouldn't be drawn into argument. He just looked straight ahead, his jaw clamped tight. It wasn't until they reached the ranch that he loosened up.

As Ma got down from the wagon, he said, "Git yore trunk packed. I'm takin' you to town tomorry an puttin' you on the noon stage."

One foot still up on the wagon wheel, Ma stood there, looking at Hank with steady eyes. She knew that the note in Hank's shirt pocket was what had made him make his sudden decision. She knew, too, that it would break her heart to leave Hank.

"No," she said slowly. "Ye'll no be gettin' rid o' me thot easy, Honk Dinbroo."

Then the battle started. Words flew all over the place. Hot words, cold words. Hank stamped up and down, telling her in his scratchy voice and in no uncertain terms that, "You air leavin', by dad, whether you like it or not."

THE argument followed them into the house. Ma got lunch, which neither ate, then got out the dishpan, heaving hot, Scotch-burred words at Hank, for she was both hurt and mad.

If Hank had been using his head, he would have noticed the short fuse Ma was operating on. But he was mad himself. Besides, he had a worry in his mind, a big one. Consequently, he was pretty cantankerous.

Ma had just said, "I'll no be leavin' 'less ye give me a reason. I think ye owes me thot much."

"I don't give a tarnation dang whut you think," he sputtered. He paused, put his hands on his hips and glared at her broad back, the ends of his mustache wiggling up and down with angry twitchings. "Whut's more, if'n you ain't ready by tomorry noon to leave, I'll hog-tie you an' take you to town jes' like I would a hog. Git that?"

That was too much for Ma. She seemed to explode all over at once. She whirled around from the dishpan and hit him so hard it nearly knocked him out from between his ears.

The reason was, she had a frying pan in her hand at the time. It's a wonder she didn't cave Hank's skull in.

Ma was sorry before Hank hit the floor. She flopped on her knees and took his head in her arms and there were tears in her eyes.

"Losh!" she grieved. "Ye big loomox. Why wi' ye always be o' rubbin' me the wrong way? I'm sorry I hit ye wi' the fry pan. darlin'. For troo, I am."

To which Hank made no comment, for he was out cold. When he finally did come to, he found that he was lying on the horsehair sofa in the parlor. There was a cold towel on his head and an ache as big as all outdoors inside it.

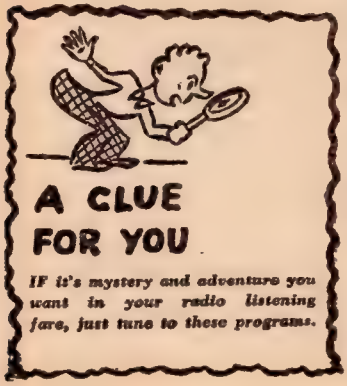
For a few seconds he half-way thought he'd slipped his cinch and gone over the Great Divide. It was the music that put the idea in his head. From somewhere came the unmistakable soft notes of a meditating musician.

Then the notes suddenly tore into a run, crescendoed up the scale to a piercing shriek. Hank jerked half-way unright, grabbed at his pounding head.

"Ohhhhhhh . . . my gawd all Avery!" he moaned.

Now he knew what it was. And he knew there was only one way to get away from it. He lurched to his feet, staggered out through the back door and headed for the barn, still holding the wet towel to his head.

"I wish't," he muttered, great melan-



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choly in his voice, "I'd busted that danged contraption ten year ago."

BACK in her room, Ma sat on the edge of her bed. Her face was red and her cheeks puffed out again. But, this time, not from temper.

She had a bagpipe air tube in her mouth and was blowing into it lustily. At the same time, her eyes closed, she rocked back and forth to the squealing wails of the bagpipe under her arm.

At a quick glance, it looked for all the world like she had a medium-sized pig under her arm, its tail in her mouth, and, besides chewing on his tail, was squeezing all hell out of him. Probably the sound effects would have been about the same is she had.

But to Ma it was, as she put it, "Wunderus, sweet moosic. Soothin' to the ears and a salve to the achin' brow."

Hank had told her a long time back that he'd just as soon have the "achin' brow" as to have his eardrums busted. But Ma paid him no mind and went right on playing her bagpipe whenever the mood was on her. Usually, the mood came when trouble was nudging her and her mind was full of worry.

Like now. Right now her mind was running over with misery. In a way, it was her own fault. While Hank had been lying there unconscious, she had taken a quick peek at that note in his shirt pocket. It read:

"I'm taking over your Anchored-O tomorrow at sundown. Move out or get shot out." It was signed, "Joad Murdock."

So now Ma knew why Murdock and his gunslicks had tried to throw down on Hank to town today; she knew why Hank had been so crotchity of late, and why he wanted her to pack and leave. And knowing nearly broke her heart, for she could see that Hank had made up his mind to pull out and let Joad Murdock take over his Anchored-O, lock, stock and barrel . . . and without a fight.

Ma got to thinking about Murdock, then, and the bagpipe started getting some real punishment. The notes turned shriller and shriller and seemed to whack at one another to get out of the tortured instrument. Out in the barn, Hank winced, let the wet towel drop from his forehead and popped his hands over his ears.

"Ohhh . . . my gawd all Avery!" he moaned again.

MA FINALLY laid aside the bagpipe and got up. She felt a little better now, for she had come to a decision. She put on her hat, momentarily mourning the loss of the cherries, and went out to the barn. From the manger, where he lay feeling sorry for himself, Hank watched her start to harness the team.

"Where you fixin' to go?" he asked.

"If I was like ye are," Ma told him without turning around, "I'd tell ye it was none o' yere domn business. But seein' as I ha' got no pizen in me gizzoord, I'll tell ye thot I'm goin' to toon. I'm goin' to get the sheriff and sick him onto thot nosty, slit-mouthed glaggy, Joad Moordock."

Hank let out a snort that blew chaff back in his face and made him sneeze. "Why . . . hachoo . . . you gone plumb cra . . . hachoo . . . crazy? Matt Dillon is Joad Murdock's right ha . . . ha . . . hachoo . . . hand man."

"Weel he's gonna wisht he was left-honded when I licht onto him," Ma said, going right on with the harnessing.

Suddenly, Hank got up, threw one leg over the edge of the manger. "You ain't gonna do no sech a dang thing. Yore goin' in and pack yore trunk. Right now. You hear me?"

Ma whirled on him. Her hands on hips, her lower jaw jutting out like a fight-minded bulldog, she glared at him, a long second.

Then, abruptly, she reached out, grabbed him by the shirt collar, pulled him off the manger, flopped him on his back and put one of her tree trunk-like knees on his chest. Next, she reached up and pulled down some halter rope that was hanging on a nail and started trussing his hands and feet together.

"Hey!" Hank yelped, squirming, but to no avail. "You cain't do this to me."

"Ye watch me," Ma told him briefly.

Hank watched, still squirming, and decided he was wrong.

When Ma had him tied to her satisfaction, she threw him over her shoulder, toted him into the house and dumped him on the sofa in the parlor.

Hank lay there looking up at her and he was most mortified to death. "Whut," he asked, his voice not very steady, "in hell you think yore doin', woman? Have you gone plumb, stark, starin' mad?"

"Ye," Ma said, ignoring his question and, at the same time, shaking a heavy finger at him, "Oot to be ashamed wi' yerself, Honk Dinbroo. I thought ye had more goomption than to let Joad Moordock push ye around. But seein' as ye ha' not, I'm gonna do whot I can to keep him fra' movin' in on yere Anchored-O. And I want ye here when I come back."

She started out, then, but at the doorway she turned and looked back. "Ha' fun," she told him.

IN TOWN, Ma pulled the team up right in front of the jail, got down and went in. There was a good deal of loud talk issuing from the open door and window for the next couple of minutes, most of it heavy with Scottish accent.

Suddenly the back door burst open. A chunky man with a tin star on his vest tore out and raced around to the front. He was definitely in a hurry and he nearly jerked the bar off the hitch rail trying to get the reins of his horse untied. He was only a cloud of dust up the street when Ma came storming to the front door.

She was breathing hard and had a warpaint red look on her face. But she simmered down in a minute, sighed, then went across the street and planked herself down on the bench underneath the cottonwood tree in the square. She pulled off her shoes, put her feet up on the old cannon and sat there muttering to herself.

"Losh!" she growled. "Honk was richt. I'll ha' to gi' the mon credik when 'tis due. Mat Dillon *is* a skoonk wi' a Joad Moordock stink to him."

She sat there feeling a heavy depression settling on her, which was something unusual for Ma. But things looked so hopeless. If, she reflected, she were a man, she could strap on a gun and go hunting for Joad Murdock. Even that, she knew, would be foolish, considering the odds. But, at least it would be fighting back.

She sighed again, her mind turning memories of the ten years of working for Hank. They had been good years, even if Hank hadn't seen fit to see in her more than just a housekeeper. It just seemed like it was more than she could bear to think about leaving Hank and the Anchored-O for good.

Suddenly she sat bolt upright. Her eyes went wide and snapped into focus on the cannon. "Whup, whup!" she said, almost gleefully. "Ye'll ha' to forego the pattin' o' yere back, seein' as ye canna quite reach it, but I dinna think there's a law whuch says ye canna shake honds wi' yerself." An argument she clinched by grabbing her right hand with her left and giving it a sound shake.

Leisurely, she put on her shoes, went up the street and had supper in the hotel dining room, which was, to Ma, an event. After supper she went into the hotel lobby, lowered herself into a rocking chair she figured would hold her weight, then sat there twiddling her thumbs and letting a satisfied "burp" loose occasionally. She looked almost happy as she rocked slowly

back and forth waiting for time to pass.

It was after ten o'clock when she left the hotel lobby. She pulled out of town a half hour later. Covered by a tarp, there was an ungaily, lobsided load in the back of the wagon as it trundled along the road toward the Anchored-O.

Back at the ranch, her first concern was to see how Hank was faring. She let the team stand while she went in to see. In the parlor, she struck a match, lit the lamp, then turned toward the sofa.

Hank was gone!

MA STOOD there a second, her face screwed into an unbelieving scowl. She could have sworn there wasn't a man on earth who could have gotten loose from the cocoon-like layers of rope she had wound around Hank.

"Domn it!" she muttered, hot exasperation in her voice. "Thot mon wi' be the end o' me, yet. Here I go get things all planned oot, and noo he wants to play hidy-seek wi' me."

She picked up the lamp and stormed through the house, thinking that she would find him hiding somewhere. But she didn't, and there was real concern on her face as she left the house and headed toward the barn, a lantern swinging at her side.

One look inside the barn told her what she wanted to know. Hank's saddle was gone.

She unhitched the team, then went slowly back to the house, undressed and crawled into bed. She lay there, her eyes squeezed tight shut, tears running down her cheeks. She sobbed once, quietly, and it sounded like her heart had been pulled in two. It was pretty hard on Ma to think that Hank had up and pulled out without so much as saying a goodbye, God-bless-you, or go-to-hell. And she was sore hurt because he had given up without a show of fight. It was a long time before she fell into a trouble sleep.

She was up early and only her red-rimmed eyes showed that she'd had a bad night. While she was eating breakfast she came to a decision. She stopped chewing, slammed down her knife and fork, a grim look settling over her face.

"Weel," she muttered, "Joad Moordock may be takin' o'er the Anchoored-O this evenin', but I'm bettin' he's gonna wisht he'd poostponed it, indefunut like."

She went outside and took the tarp off the bulky load in the wagon. Straining, grunting and blowing, she unloaded the cannon she had swiped from the courthouse square the night before. She wheeled it out in front of the house, stood several moments in deep thought, then finally pointed it towards the bridge which crossed the creek below the house.

There were only two ways Joad and his gunslicks could approach the house. One was to come across the bridge. The other was to come down the narrow draw behind the house. Willows grew lush along the creek, making it practically impossible to approach the house in front except by crossing the bridge. And the draw in back of the house was so narrow that one person with a couple of loaded rifles could make it mighty unhealthy for anyone to come down that way.

As the sun started to drop behind the ridge in the late afternoon, Ma came out of the house and crouched down on the ground near the edge of the front porch.

It was a position that commanded a good view of both approaches to the house. A loaded shotgun and rifle leaned against the porch at her side. The cannon was there in front of her, also loaded. Loaded with an overly generous amount of blasting powder Hank happened to have stached away in the barn, and a wide assortment of junk Ma had picked up from around the place, such as nails, bolts, broken horseshoes and old chain. A piece of fuse, one end stuck in the cannon's touchhole, the other leading back over

the wheel toward where Ma was kneeling, completed the armament.

The slanting sun was in her eyes, and bothering her. She started to get up to go in the house after her hat. But right then, she saw it. A little, curling dust cloud down the slope beyond the creek. She forgot all about the hat, and her hand came up to shade her eyes as she watched the swirling dust cloud move nearer.

IN A moment, through a break in the willows where the bridge crossed the creek, she could see a group of riders just breaking over a hill-top. There were only four. Ma nodded with satisfaction. She had expected more.

Quickly, she leaned over, struck a match, held it out toward the frayed end of the fuse. Her hand was shaking so, she had to move her whole body closer, use both hands to steady the match.

The fuse caught with a puffing hiss. Ma looked up, a t i g h t grin on her face. "'Nother minoot, now, and I dinna doot but what Joad Moordock wi' be thinkin' the divil ha' caught oop wi' him, for true," she muttered gleefully.

But Ma probably wouldn't have been so gleeful if she could have seen what was pussy-footing toward her, not thirty feet away from her broad back.

Five minuter earlier, a half-dozen riders had left their horses up the draw out of sight of the house. On foot, they started down the draw, sneaking along in a humped over crouch. They had stopped out back of the corral, held a whispered conference, then started working toward the house.

Ma would probably have seen them as they came out around the corral, but it was right at that time she saw the approaching dust cloud from the other direction, and all of her attention was directed that way.

The big, wide guy in the lead saw Ma all of a sudden there by the front porch, and there was a burning kill-fury in his black eyes. It was Joad Murdock, and the corners of his slit-mouth turned down a trifle further as he pointed.

Suddenly Ma rared to her feet. Her face blanched to a sheet white. "Oh . . . losh!" she shrieked, jumping toward the cannon.

For down by the creek the lead rider had just ridden on to the bridge. He wasn't big and brawny like Joad Murdock, but scrawny and skinny like Hank Dinbro. In fact, that's who it was.

Ma's hurtling body looked like a small haywagon on the loose. She grabbed at the burning fuse. Missed. Stumbled.

"Oh God!" she entreated as she fell.

She knew that by the time she could get her bulk back up again and to the fuse, it would be too late.

As she went down she caught at the right wheel to break her fall. Her mind, working with the speed of heat lightning, sent a flashing impulse to her big arms. She heaved herself over on the ground to add leverage to her straining arms.

The snout of the cannon moved, dropped back, then moved again. Pivoting in a quickening arc, it swung halfway around.

"Wham!"

A puff of smoke, followed by a great, blooming flower of flame, burst from the cannon barrel. It seemed like all outdoors had suddenly turned into one big noise.

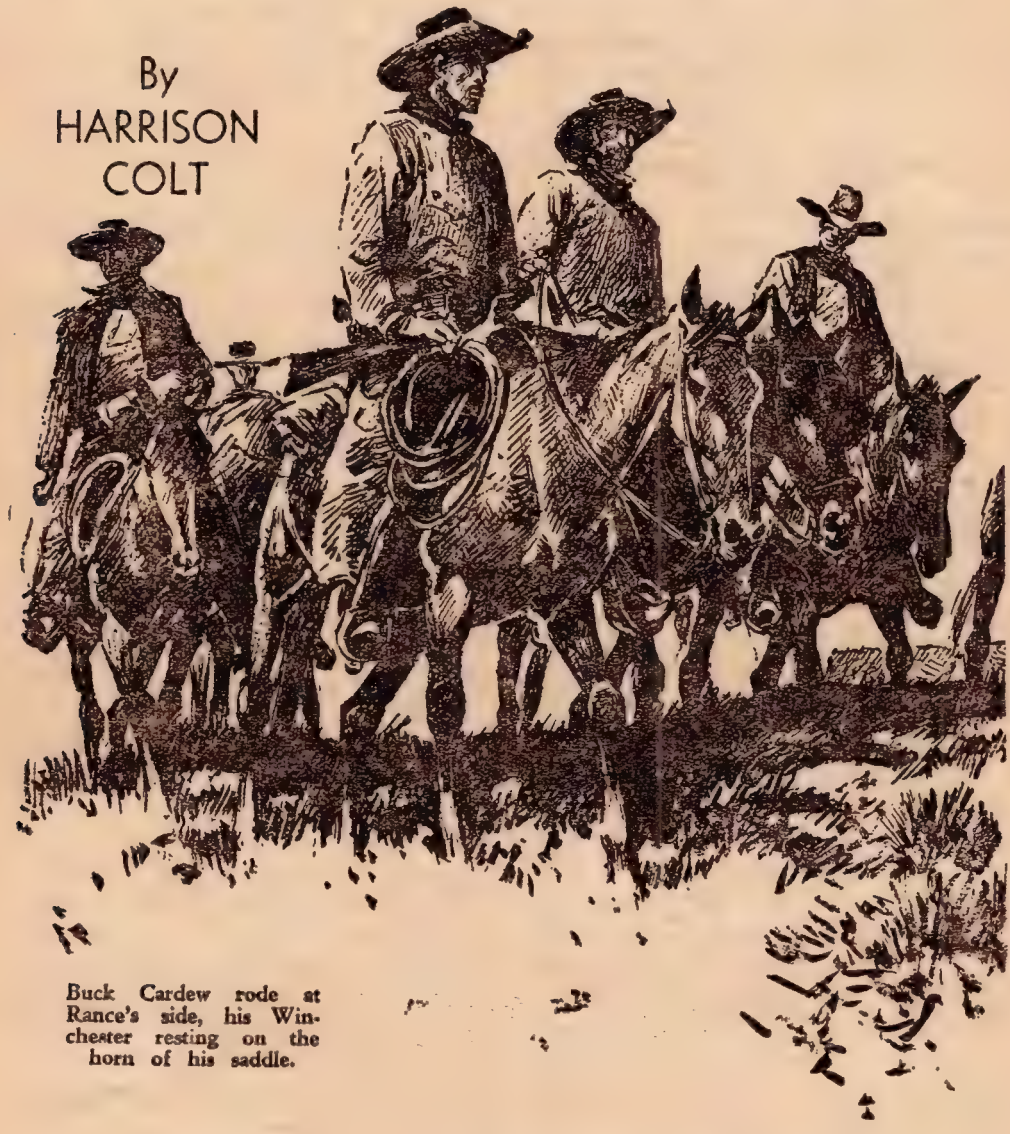
The half-dozen men who were cat-footing it toward Ma's rear just seemed to loose all interest in living, and wilted slowly in their tracks. It was painless and quick, for they never knew what hit them.

BUT things were happening down below on the ridge, too. Hank Dinbro's horse went straight up in the air at the blast of the cannon. Hank went up, too. But he didn't come down on the horse, because the horse was going other places.

(Continued on page 128)

Fill Your Hand or

By HARRISON COLT

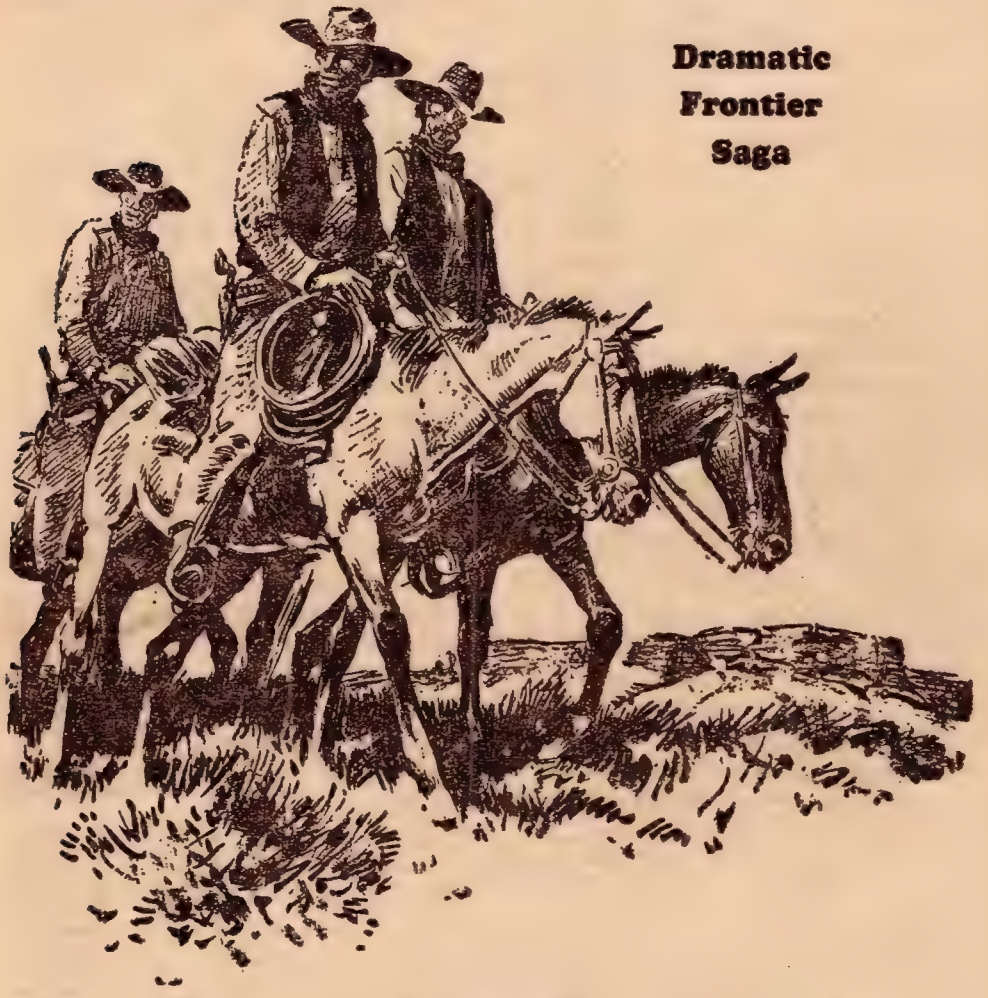


Buck Cardew rode at Rance's side, his Winchester resting on the horn of his saddle.

Even his father and his girl thought Rance Slater was yellow for not gunning down the man who bushwhacked his brother, and then sent Rance to jail. But Stony Lonesome teaches a man how to wait . . . silent and patient as a loaded six-shooter—or the yawning grave. . . .

Fill Your Coffin!

Dramatic Frontier Saga



CHAPTER ONE

The Ghost From Cold Stony

TOM LANGERT was standing on the awninged planks in front of Lacey's General Store talking with two other men when Rance Slater spurred his grey gelding down Rainesburg's wagon-rutted main street. Langert glanced carelessly toward the street, saw Rance, and seemed to freeze. An expression of surprise appeared for a fleeting instant on his spare, impassive features. Woodenly, he watched the horseman ride by, only a certain bleakness in his eyes giving any hint of his inner feelings.

Rance moved ahead, his eyes darting keen, observant glances at the

stores and buildings on either side of the street. Rainesburg didn't seem to have changed much since he'd last laid eyes on it. It seemed queer that the passage of two years should leave the town so little changed. Two years, Rance reflected, was a long time. A man could change a great deal in two years.

As he came opposite the Crimson Palace, a sudden impulse caused him to get down and tie his horse to the rack. Before he headed for the swinging doors, he glanced quickly up the street in the direction of the General Store. A grim smile flickered at the corners of his mouth as he saw that Langert was no longer standing there. He was seated on the box of his wagon, heading north out of town, a fog of yellow dust slowly settling at his rear. He was slapping the rumps of his team impatiently with the reins and it was evident he was in a hurry. Rance knew that he was on his way out to Bent Markham's Double-D ranch with the news of Rance Slater's return.

Rance watched him for a moment longer, then pushed open a batwing and stepped into the large, dusky saloon. Bill Duffy, the bartender, was talking with two cowhands halfway down the bar. He twisted his head on his thick, bullish neck and his eyes widened as he caught sight of Rance.

"Damn my black an' sinful soul!" he growled. A slow grin spread across the man's knife-scarred, unhandsome features. "Rance Slater! How long you been back?"

Rance shook hands. "Just now rode in from Palmas City."

"Then you haven't been out to the Bar-S yet?"

"No. I'm on my way there now."

The bartender grinned. "This is gonna be bad news for somebody. . . . Does Markham know you're back?" There was an eager, expectant glint in Duffy's black eyes.

Rance lifted his lean shoulders in an indifferent shrug. "Ran into Langert in the street a few minutes ago. Reckon he's on his way out to Markham's place right now."

Duffy gave a chuckle. "Wish I could see Markham's face when he hears the news. He's had his own way around here for the last two years, with your paw ailin'. But I reckon things are gonna be a little different from now on, ain't they, Rance?"

Rance saw that the bartender was staring at him with a queer eagerness. A flicker of surprise and disappointment crossed the man's face as Rance replied, "I don't know, Bill. . . . Is Cherry around?"

"Cherry? Oh, sure, the boss is upstairs."

"Thanks, Bill. I'll see you later."

Rance turned and started toward the stairs leading to the saloon's second floor. But Bill Duffy called after him, "Rance—just a minute!"

Rance swung around. The bartender was frowning uneasily. "Rance, you've been away a long time. Two years . . . that's a hell of a long time for a woman to wait!"

"What are you tryin' to say? That Cherry. . . ?"

"Hell, Rance!" Duffy's black eyes were unhappy. "I'm not tryin' to say anythin'. Jest that you been away a long time an' you can't expect things to be the same as when you went away. You got to keep that in mind."

Rance mounted the stairs, knocked at the door of Cherry Lamont's living quarters. He frowned uneasily as he waited, still thinking of the bartender's words. A moment later the door swung wide and the proprietress of the Crimson Palace stood before him. She was a tawny-haired, green-eyed young woman whose flowered silken gown displayed quite daringly her creamy white shoulders and ample white bosom.

FOR a moment, she stood staring at Rance, a startled look on her undeniably attractive, though heavily-rouged, features. Then she said, softly, "Darling, I can heardly believe it's you!" She stepped forward, threw her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth hard against his lips.

Rance Slater felt oddly embarrassed. He was a little relieved when she stepped back and said, "Come in, Rance. I'll get Bill to bring up some Sam Taylor for you. It'll be just like old times."

She brushed past him, leaned over the railing and called down to the bartender. Then she turned and led the way through the little office into the richly-furnished living quarters.

Rance stared about him, and Cherry must have seen the surprise in his eyes. She smiled and said, "How do you like it, Rance? Quite an improvement over the way it was, isn't it?"

The man nodded "Furniture like this must have cost a fortune A piano, too. The Crimson Palace must have become a regular gold-mine, judging by all this."

"It's paid its way," the girl said. "And some investments I made didn't turn out too badly. But let's not talk about that. I want to hear about you."

"About me? There isn't much to tell. A man who's spent two years in prison isn't anxious to look back on them."

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, Rance. I meant how you were, what your plans are for the future. About us—if you'd like."

Rance sat down in one of the ornate chairs, gave the girl a sharp glance He was remembering Bill Duffy's words. "Yes," he said, "I think I would like to talk about us. After all, I've been away a long time. Lots of things can happen in two years. A woman can fall out of love with one man and into love with someone else in that time."

Cherry Lamont stood beside the table, lighting a cigarette. She flicked a swift, veiled look at Rance, then dropped her eyes to the cigarette in her hand. "What do you mean, Rance?"

He made a careless gesture with his hand. "Nothing Just that it could happen to anyone. It hasn't happened to you, has it, Cherry?"

She shook her head quickly. "I love you, Rance. Nothing could ever change that." She came to him, lowered herself into his lap, let one arm slide about his neck. "Don't you know that?"

Just then Duffy came into the room, bearing a tray with two bottles and two glasses. His eyes slid across the room to the man and woman and a faint frown hardened the ugly lines of his face. After that, he kept his gaze carefully away from the two and left the room.

Cherry got up and poured a drink from one of the bottles. "You see," she said, "I haven't forgotten the brand of whiskey you drink—even in two years."

He accepted the glass and watched her fill her own glass from the decanter. "And you still have a fondness for imported French wines. . . . What shall we drink to?"

She came back and resumed her place on his knees. "To us, darling," she smiled. "What else?"

They drank.

There was a short silence after that. The girl said suddenly, "What are you going to do, Rance?"

SOMETHING in her voice puzzled Rance, something repressed and hidden that could not remain entirely hidden. He saw that she was staring at him with the same eagerness, the same expectancy, that Bill Duffy had revealed earlier.

"Do? Just what do you mean, Cherry?"

A quick impatience crept into her voice. "I mean about Bent Markham. What did you think I meant?"

"What do you think I should do?"

The man could feel her body stiffen. She regarded him with startled eyes. "What in the world has come over you, Rance? You haven't forgotten what you promised Bent Markham in court? That he'd have cause to regret the lies he told about you at the trial? You surely haven't forgotten that?"

Rance shook his head, his eyes sober. "No," he said, "I haven't forgotten. But I've had two years to think things over. At least that's one thing that can be said for prison. You get lots of time to think. Now I'm not so sure Markham was lying, after all."

"Rance, that doesn't make sense! Markham identified you as the leader of the men he saw running off his cattle!"

"I know. But it's possible he actually did think it was me he saw in the dim light. Remember, this happened just before dawn. And there still isn't any explanation of how that shoe from my bay came to be found near the rustling attempt."

"You don't think that Markham found it somewhere and planted it there to railroad you into prison?"

Rance Slater sighed. "That's what I thought once. But there are a couple of things that don't fit in with that idea. In the first place, I'm sure that when I stabled the bay the afternoon before, he had all four shoes. Yet when the sheriff turned up next morning, one of the bay's shoes was missing. Another thing. How do you explain away the sheriff's testimony? He swore he followed the trail of one of the rustlers and it led to the Bar-S, right to the bay in the barn."

"Really, Rance, I never expected to hear you talk like this! You know Sheriff Benson was always friendly to Markham. He'd say whatever Markham told him to say!"

Rance shook his head moodily. "I'm not so sure. There's something queer about the whole business. The more I've thought of it, the more I've become convinced there's something else behind it all."

Cherry Lamont withdrew her arm from around Rance's neck, and there was an odd antagonism in her greenish eyes. "Then you don't intend to do anything about Markham?"

He smiled. "I know this may sound queer after those statements I made two years ago. But two years can do something to a man, Cherry. Especially two years in prison. It can make even a rash, hot-tempered kind of fool like myself learn a little about self-control. No, I don't think I'll go hunting Markham with a six-gun until I'm positive he's the man I want."

Cherry Lamont had risen to her feet. She stood looking down at him with a queer expression on her face. Rance was startled at the shadows under her eyes. For the first time, he was aware that the saloon proprietress had lost some of her youthful loveliness during his absence. He couldn't help noticing that the line of her chin was no longer as firm and graceful as he remembered it.

"What about your brother? Are you ready to forgive Markham for that, too?"

Rance's eyes narrowed, his mouth tightened. "I heard about that," he said. "What makes you think Markham had anything to do with it?"

There was something close to anger in Cherry's voice now. "Who else had anything to gain by murdering him? You know that the small ranchers all hate the Bar-S. And Markham is their leader. They do whatever he tells them to."

The man's face had gone hard, grim. He said slowly, "I intend to find out who it was that dry-gulched Larry. If Markham had anything to do with it—"

A look of satisfaction and relief flickered across Cherry Lamont's rouged and powdered features. She smiled. "Let's have another drink, Rance. . . ."

ON HIS way out of the saloon, Rance paused beside the bar and questioned the big bartender. "What did you mean, Bill, by what you said just before I went upstairs?"

"Oh, that!" Bill Duffy grinned, although his eyes still held a vague uneasiness. "I talk too damn much, Rance. Forget it! It wasn't anything."

Rance wasn't satisfied with the man's explanation, but he knew he'd get nothing further out of him. Bill Duffy, for one thing, was fiercely loyal and devoted to the interests of his employer. Rance wondered if he wasn't in love with Cherry Lamont himself.

Rance had stepped into the street and was untying his horse from the splintered hitch-rail, when a deep, rumbly voice behind him said, "So they've turned the curly wolf loose again!"

Rance swung around. A graying, shrewd-eyed man stood on the opposite walk, frowning across the street at him. Rance recognized Jud Barkley, editor and publisher of the *Rainesburg Gazette*.

Rance grinned and moved over to the other man's side. "Hello, Barkley. You don't sound very pleased to see me back?"

"I'm not," said the editor. "As a matter of fact, I've been dreading this day. I suppose, now that you are back, it won't be long before seven different kinds of hell breaks out in the valley."

"You think my return will do that?"

"It will—unless a miracle should happen and you'd forget about Bent Markham." The older man sighed. "But I know you too well to think anything like that'd ever come to pass. A stubborn, hot-headed fool like you never gets any sense until it's too late."

"You think trouble between Markham and myself will stir up the whole valley? Why?"

"Because the small ranchers hate the Bar-S. They blame your father for all their troubles. There would be open warfare right now between them and Bar-S if it wasn't for Markham. He's the one man among them that can hold the hot-heads down, keep peace in the valley."

A soberness had come into Rance Slater's eyes. "Just one thing. Do you think Markham had anything to do with what happened to Larry?"

The newspaperman studied Rance's face carefully. "Do you?"

"I don't know. But I intend to find out."

"If you're sure he had nothing to do with the dry-gulching, you'd be willing to call off your quarrel with him?"

Rance nodded. "If I were sure," he said, an emphasis on each word.

Jud Barkley said, "Damn if that doesn't sound queer coming from you. Mebbe them two years in prison done you some good. Anyway, I don't think you'll find that Markham had anything to do with your brother's killing. I've known Mark-

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ham as long as I've known you and your rather. He's not the kind of a man to shoot an enemy in the back. Besides, wouldn't that be a hell of a thing to do to the brother of the girl he's in love with?"

"I'm Ann's brother, too," Rance reminded him. "Yet that didn't stop him from giving the testimony that sent me to jail."

"I know. But that was different. That was a matter of duty, and Bent felt he had to do it. He'd rather have cut off a hand than testify, but his duty to his fellow ranchers forced him into it—even though he knew it might mean the finish between him and Ann. That proves the kind of a man he is. He wouldn't lie about you, even if it meant losing his girl."

Rance eyed the newspaperman sharply. "You think his evidence was the truth—about seeing me with the rustling gang? You think I was actually there?"

Jud Barkley frowned. "Mebbe I do. And after all, a man is judged by the company he keeps. If he chooses to spend most of his time drinking and gambling and hanging around a cheap dance-hall, he has no right expecting folks to think other than the worst."

Rance hid his resentment under a careless grin. "That's what I like about you, Jud. You never say anything but exactly what you mean."

CHAPTER TWO

He Killed Your Brother!

IT WAS a little past noon when Rance completed the hot, dusty ride out to the ranch. He found a fever of excitement rising in his veins as he topped a slight rise and rode down to the cluster of buildings, barns and corrals that was the Bar-S headquarters.

As he swung into the ranchyard, Will Dockett, a spidery, bow-legged little man who had been a Bar-S hand as long as Rance could remember, hobbled out of the barn. He halted and stared, his jaw sagging. Then his leathery face broke into a wide grin. "Rance! How be yuh, boy?"

Rance jumped down and shook the man's hand. "Glad to see you, Will. How's Dad?"

A slight shadow crossed the man's face. "He ain't so good, Rance. But I got an idea that seein' you will do him more good than all the doctors and medicine in the world put together. Dawgone, but I'm glad to see yuh. Mebbe now things around here will be in fer some improvement."

Rance turned his horse over to the ancient cowhand and walked swiftly toward the ranchhouse. He wondered a little at Dockett's words, but he forgot them a moment later as he stepped up the porch steps and flung open the door.

Ike Slater, a lanky, raw-boned man in his seventies, sat in his wheel-chair at the head of the table, reading a paper. Rance's sister, Ann, was clearing away the dishes from the noon meal. Both man and girl stared at Rance in startled silence.

Then his sister gave a little sob and came quickly into his arms. "Rance! It's really you?"

Rance said, "'Lo, sis. . . . Here, let me look at you." He held her off at arm's length. "Dawgone, if it don't seem like you've gotten prettier while I was away!"

She laughed and brushed away a tear quickly. "Sit down at the table, Rance. There's some steak left, and it won't take any time at all for me to warm up the potatoes. After a man says nice things like that about a girl, the least she can do is feed him."

There was a tight, strained smile on Ike Slater's gaunt face. "I been waitin' a long time fer this day, Rance," he said simply.

"How you been, Dad?"

The old cattleman smiled. "Let's not talk about that. Jest seein' you ag'in has done wonders fer me."

Later, as Rance finished his meal and settled back in his chair with a contented sigh, there was a feeling of warmth and happiness inside him.

Ike Slater waited until the girl cleared the table and went into the kitchen to wash the dishes. Then he leaned forward slightly in his wheel-chair, an eagerness in his keen old eyes. "You made any plans yet, Rance?"

Rance looked up slowly. "Plans?"

A GRIMNESS had settled in Ike Slater's lined features. He nodded. "Yeah. I mean about takin' care of the damn varmint that killed your brother!"

Rance was silent for a moment or two. "You think it was Markham?"

"Think? I damn well know it!" Rage flared in the cattleman's blue eyes.

Rance said thoughtfully, "I understand it was Buck Cardew that brought in Larry's body?"

"It was. Buck said he found him near a break in the barbed wire fence between Markham's land and Bar-S range. Somebody had cut the wires. Seems likely Larry had surprised the men cuttin' the wires and they killed him."

"These men—they leave any trail?"

Ike Slater shook his thick mane of white hair. "Nary a trace. There'd been a hail storm earlier in the day and any sign would have been washed out anyway."

"That's all you know?"

"Except that the boy had been killed by a bullet from a Winchester .30-30."

Rance frowned. "There's not much there to indicate that Markham was responsible."

An expression of impatience flitted across Ike Slater's face. "Who else could it have been? Markham's crowd had it in fer the Bar-S ever since we won that fight over water rights in court. Look what they done to you. You ain't forgotten how Markham lied in order to send you to prison?"

Rance smiled faintly. "I'm not likely to forget Markham's testimony at the trial. But still—"

Ike Slater's features were stony, his eyes narrowed on Rance's face. His large, bony hands were gripping the arms of his wheel-chair so tightly the knuckles stood out like daubs of white paint. "What is it, Rance?" he asked finally. "You—you ain't afraid of Markham?"

Rance felt the heat flood up into his face. "You know that ain't it, Dad," he replied warmly. "It's just that I can't make myself believe Markham would be guilty of anything like that. After all, he was pretty fond of Ann once."

"That was before all this trouble broke out," the old man pointed out gruffly. "Before the other ranchers banded together to fight Bar-S, and elected him their leader. A lot of things have changed since then."

Rance fell silent. His father seemed to be waiting for him to say something more. When he remained silent, disappointment etched fine lines at the corners of the older man's eyes, and his face took on an expression of bleakness.

Ann came back into the room and gave both men a quick stare of surprise. "What's come over you two? You're both as sober as owls. . . ."

Rance forced a smile. "What do you expect? Do you think we should sit here chattering like a couple of old maids at a sewing bee?"

But Ike Slater didn't smile. He said, "Wheel me to my room, Ann. I'm tired. Feel like I need to lay down fer a while."

Rance watched his sister push the old man's chair out of the room, a lump of guilt rising in his throat. It did something to him to see how old and weary his father looked.

THAT evening, around six o'clock, Buck Cardew and eight or nine riders galloped into the ranchyard. Rance waited

a few minutes, then stepped outside and walked toward the bunkhouse where the men were washing up for supper.

The Bar-S foreman, a quick-moving, dapper-looking man with black, alert eyes and thin, rather handsome features, seemed pleased to see Rance, shook hands warmly. Staring around at the others, Rance was surprised at the absence of familiar faces. With the exception of one or two, these were new hands, complete strangers to him. They were, for the most part, hard-faced, tough-looking men, and several had the unmistakable stamp of veteran gun-fighters. He began to get a glimmer of what Will Dockett had hinted at.

Rance suggested that Cardew step up to the house with him and the man readily agreed. As they moved across the ranch-yard, Rance asked, "What happened to Agnew and Drummond and the other old hands?"

Cardew smiled and shrugged his lean shoulders. "You know how it is, Rance. Most of those men were drifters. I understand Agnew got himself a job managing a ranch down in the Panhandle for some English owners. Drummond and O'Leary quit. One or two I had to let go for various reasons."

Rance was far from satisfied with this explanation, but he said nothing. Instead he requested. "Tell me about my brother."

The two men found seats on the porch steps. Buck Cardew flicked his quick glance at the other man, then looked away swiftly. A grin twisted his lips. "I thought you'd want to know about that," he said.

Rance listened to the foreman's story in its entirety, then said bluntly, "Hell, there's not an ounce of evidence there that Markham had anything to do with the killing!"

Buck Cardew's startled gaze swung toward Rance. "Don't be a damn fool, Rance! Everybody knows Markham did it!"

"Maybe he did. But I'd have to have more proof than what you've just given me before I'd be ready to say so!"

The foreman's eyes narrowed, and his brow was furrowed with mingled puzzlement and anger. "What the hell's come over you, Rance? You sound like you don't give a damn whether the man who killed your brother is walking around alive or not!"

With an effort Rance restrained himself from smashing a fist into the lean man's face. He kept a tight rein on his anger, even managed to keep his voice flat and emotionless as he said, "Some of those new hands are gun-slicks. What are they doing on a Bar-S payroll?"

The foreman stirred uneasily. "Sure," he said. "Mebbe a couple of the boys do know how to handle a sixgun. What's wrong with that? They might come in handy sooner than you think."

"Get rid of them!"

Cardew's jaw dropped. "What's that?"

"I said—get rid of them!"

A wild fury flamed in the foreman's black eyes. He stared at Rance sullenly. "I'll be damned if I will!" he snapped. "If they go, I'll go, too!"

Rance said grimly, "Suit yourself, Cardew. I think you been getting too big for your britches, anyhow."

Cardew swallowed hard, and the rage began to fade from his eyes. He was silent for a while. Then he said, "Ann hasn't told you then?"

"Hasn't told me what?"

Buck Cardew seemed to have recovered some of his self-confidence. "Ann and I are going to be married some time next month."

Rance felt a queer little shock run through his body. He sat staring at the foreman for a moment, then slowly got to his feet. He said, "You're not in the family yet, Cardew. My order still stands. Give those gunnies their time."

Buck Cardew scowled. "If you say so,"

he grunted, and moved away with angry strides.

RANCE went back into the house, found his sister busily preparing supper. She looked up with a smile, brushed a strand of dark chestnut hair from her forehead with the back of her wrist. "You getting hungry, Rance? Things will be ready in a few minutes."

"Ann," he said, "you didn't tell me you and Buck Cardew were going to be married?"

She gave him a quick glance. "Didn't I?" she said, after a moment. "I guess there was so much to talk about, I forgot to mention it."

"Funny thing," he said slowly. "I always knew the way Cardew felt about you. But I never guessed you cared anything for him."

The girl said, "You don't approve?"

Rance shrugged, frowning slightly. "Ann, you're twenty-one. I reckon you know what you want. If you feel you're honestly in love with Buck Cardew—"

A shadow seemed to flit across the girl's face. She broke in angrily, "Do you think I would promise to marry a man if I wasn't in love with him?"

Rance gave his sister a puzzled stare, astonished at the violence of her outburst, the surge of fierce anger in her voice. "Sorry, Ann," he said. "What makes you think I meant to suggest anything like that?"

A flush had come into the girl's cheeks and she kept her eyes carefully averted from his glance. "Forgive me, Rance. I—I don't know what's come over me lately."

Rance was staring at her queerly. "What's the matter, sis? Is it Markham, after all?"

Ann Slater turned on him furiously. "Markham? I hate him! I despise him! Do you think for one moment—after what happened—" Her voice trailed off and she began to sob. A look of misery had come into the girl's hazel eyes, and it was there that Rance read his answer. . . .

After supper, Rance went outside and sat on the porch steps. He took papers and a sack of Durham from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette. He had it half-smoked when a sound made him look up.

A spidery figure had moved around the corner of the house and paused beside him. The light of the newly-risen moon fell upon Will Dockett's grinning features. "Didn't take you long to give 'em gun-slicks their walkin' papers," he chuckled. "Buck is fit to be tied, he's so mad."

Rance smiled a little at the frank pleasure in the man's voice. "You don't like Buck Cardew?"

The little man shook his head violently. "Never did. Told him so to his face once. Reckon he'd have heaved me off the Bar-S long ago if it weren't fer your Pa."

Rance said, "You got any idea why Cardew brought in those gunmen?"

"Ain't no secret about that. He's been hankerin' fer trouble with the other ranchers right along. After Larry was killed, he'd have cleaned 'em out of the valley if old Ike hadn't decided to wait 'til you got back afore havin' the showdown with 'em."

"What's your opinion, Will? Did Markham have anything to do with drygulching my brother?"

Will Dockett took his time about replying. "No, Rance," he said finally. "I don't reckon he did."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I can't prove nothin', but I got a feelin' that someone right here on the Bar-S might of had a hand in thet killin'!"

Rance gave him a startled glance. "Go on."

"Seems to me, it might of been the same gent that rode your bay horse in that raid on Markham's cattle. The one who

pried that shoe off and left it behind to make sure you'd be mixed up in the mess, then left a clear trail back to the Bar-S that even a greenhorn couldn't of missed!"

"Who you got in mind?"

Will Dockett frowned. "I ain't mentionin' any names—yet. Jest think over what I've told you and see if it makes any sense. When I get somethin' definite to go on, I'll let you know."

For some time after Dockett had gone, Rance remained on the porch steps. He realized that the little man had gone as far as he dared in hinting that Buck Cardew was mixed up in the affair. Rance considered the matter carefully, then shook his head. The whole idea was too fantastic. Will Dockett was evidently letting his dislike of the Bar-S foreman warp his usually sound judgement. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Empire in the Dust

IT WAS the following afternoon that the huge bartender of the Crimson Palace, Bill Duffy, put in an appearance at the Bar-S. "Cherry wants to see you," he informed Rance.

"Anything wrong?"

The man shrugged his enormous shoulders and sat his saddle clumsily, staring down at Rance with a blank look on his ugly, scarred features. "She didn't say. She just said she wants to see you."

Rance saddled his horse and accompanied the man back to town. He found Cherry waiting for him in her rooms over the saloon. Rance was struck by the pallor of her face, the brightness of her green eyes.

"I had to see you, Rance," she said hurriedly. "I found out something I thought you ought to know. Bill, fetch that watch from my desk in the office."

The huge bartender returned in a minute, and she took something from his hand and held it out for Rance's inspection. "Ever see that before?"

Rance's eyes hardened as he stared at the gold watch in his hand. He looked up swiftly. "Where'd you get this?"

Cherry said, "You recognize it?"

Rance nodded. "It was Larry's. I'd recognize it anywhere."

"Bart Graham lost it in a poker game downstairs the other evening. Just this morning Bill happened to see it and remembered he had seen your brother wearing one exactly like it."

"Bart Graham?" Rance felt rage go through him like the thrust of a white-hot poker. "He's one of Markham's hands, isn't he?"

Bill Duffy broke in gruffly. "That's right. He works for Markham."

Rance got to his feet. "Thanks, Cherry."

The woman studied his face. "What you going to do, Rance?"

But Rance Slater didn't seem to hear her question. He walked quickly from the room and went downstairs. For a moment he stood staring about the main room of the saloon. He saw Tom Langert and another rancher leaning against the bar nearby and moved in their direction.

"Markham in town?" he asked.

Lennart and the other man swung around in surprise. Lennart said, in a chill, hostile voice, "No, he ain't. Why?"

"Too bad. I'd have liked to put a bullet through his murdering, cowardly heart!"

Lennart's face remained bleak, impassive. "I'll tell Markham that."

"Good. I'll be waiting for him here in town tomorrow morning."

"I'll tell him that, too," said the rancher. His voice was calm, almost indifferent.

RANCE turned and started for the door. Just before he reached the batwings, Jud Barkley blocked his way. The edi-

tor's face was red, his eyes angry. "I might have known this would happen!" he snarled. "A leopard never changes his spots. I don't know what got into me to think different. For a little while I actually believed those two years in prison had turned you into a man instead of leaving you the damned, hot-headed young fool you were!"

Rance eyed him coldly. "Why don't you go peddle your papers, Jud? This don't concern you."

"The hell it don't! Can't you realize what you've done? You've just struck a spark that'll ignite the whole valley and let loose more fire and bloodshed than has been seen around these parts since the Comanches were driven out. Don't you realize that women and kids get hurt, too, when something like this flares up?"

The words did not dent Rance Slater's anger. "Why don't you print that in your paper? It might make an editorial some people would like. Murdering, conniving varmints like Bent Markham, especially!"

He brushed past the newspaperman, climbed onto his horse and started back to the Bar-S. It was late in the evening when he arrived at the ranch. As he dismounted before the barn, Will Dockett moved out of the darkness.

He spoke in a low, careful tone. "Buck Cardew went fer a ride last night. Left the ranch after everythin' was quiet and didn't get back until almost mornin'. He rode off in the direction of town. What you make of that?"

"I don't give a damn what Buck Cardew did! Will, I know who killed my brother!"

Rance heard the other man draw in his breath sharply.

"Well?"

"It was Markham! Those two years behind bars must've affected my eyes—otherwise I would have seen what everyone was able to see right along!"

Will Dockett made no sound, but even in the darkness Rance could sense the man's disbelief. "You sure you know what you're talkin' about, Rance?" he inquired anxiously.

Rance informed the man what had taken place on his visit to town. After he had finished, the other was silent for a while. Then he said, "I don't like it, Rance. It's too pat. Why should Duffy have waited until this mornin' to recognize the watch as Larry's? Somehow, it don't hang together jest right."

"I think it does, Will. You just can't see it because you got your heart set on proving that Cardew is the guilty party."

"Damn it all, Rance! I still think so! Give me a chance to prove Markham's not your man!"

"A little late for that, isn't it? I'm riding into town tomorrow morning to have it out with him."

"Look, Rance," said the other, in a pleading voice, "let me take that watch and ride over to Markham's ranch tonight. I'll confront him and Bart Graham with it and I'll know the truth when I see their faces. How about it?"

Rance said, "I'm not sure that's such a good idea. If they're guilty you might not get out of there alive. You thought of that?"

"I kin take care of myself, Rance. Ain't you forgettin' I was old Bat's deputy at Dodge fer one year? I kin still handle a sixgun if I have to."

"I think it's a waste of time," Rance said. "But if you got your mind set on it, I reckon I got no business stopping you."

Rance stood for a moment while Dockett disappeared into the blackness of the barn. He heard him leading a horse from one of the stalls, talking to it soothingly as he began to saddle up.

Then Rance turned away, heading for the ranchhouse. Once, he thought he heard a faint sound in the darkness close to the barn and whirled around, his hand darting

to the gun at his side. He stood there for several moments, peering intently into the gloom and listening. But the sound was not repeated, and a moment later he resumed his journey to the house.

RANCE spent a restless night, his mind filled with a remorseless parade of thoughts and memories. Once, along towards morning, he thought he heard the sound of hoofs outside his window and guessed that Will Dockett had returned from the Double-D. He had an impulse to get up and find out what, if anything, the old man had learned. But then he decided it could wait until morning.

As the first grayness of dawn began to lighten the room, he got up and dressed. He went to the window, suddenly giving an astonished oath as his eyes fell on the saddled horse in the ranchyard.

There was a queasiness at the pit of his stomach and a queer icy anger was chilling his blood as he hurried from the house. On closer inspection, he recognized the horse as the one Dockett had chosen last night. The fear within him became sickening certainty when he saw several rust-colored spots on the saddle, recognized them as dried blood.

By this time men were spilling from the bunkhouse. They gathered around Rance, curiosity in their faces, staring at the saddled horse.

Rance said, "Saddle your horses, boys. We got a job to do."

* * *

They found Will Dockett at the fork in the road that lead to Bent Markham's Double-D. He lay face down, a crumpled shape by the side of the road, three bullet holes through his chest. He had been dead a number of hours.

The cold fury lay like a hard lump under Rance's heart. As they started back to the Bar-S, he said, "I intended to go into town alone this morning. I've changed my mind. Any of you boys that want to come along are welcome to do so."

Buck Cardew's lean face broke into a narrow smile. His darting, black eyes held a gleam of satisfaction. "Now you're talking, Rance. The boys have just been waiting the chance to tangle with Markham and his damn ranchers. Ain't that right, boys?"

A growl of agreement went up from the Bar-S riders. One man said, "I liked old Will. He was a good one to ride the river with."

It was ten o'clock when Rance and his party reached Rainesburg. Buck Cardew rode at Rance's side, a tight little grin at the corners of his mouth, his Winchester resting carelessly on the horn of his saddle. The Bar-S riders moved up the street, aware of the glances of the townspeople watching from either walk. There was worry and resentment on some of the faces, and several storekeepers began locking their doors for the day.

A few ranchers had come into town early. They stood on the walk in front of the *Gazette* office in a hostile knot, their hard, unfriendly stares directed up the street at the approaching riders. Rance saw that each man had a holstered gun at his hip.

Rance drew up before Lacey's General Store and dismounted. Hitching his horse to the rail, he walked inside. Lacey, a bald, timid-looking man with glasses, regarded him nervously. He seemed relieved when he found out that Rance's purpose in entering the store was merely to purchase some ammunition for his Colt.

A minute or two later, while Rance was replenishing the supply of cartridges in his gun-belt, one of the Bar-S men poked his head through the door. "Markham's ridin' in," he announced.

Rance stepped out onto the porch of the mercantile and gazed up the street.

At the corral at the far end of town, Bent Markham and his followers were getting down off their horses. Already a number of them were drifting casually up the street, advancing along the board walks. . . .

Rance let his gaze touch the faces of the men clustered about him. He frowned slightly and asked, "Where's Cardew?"

One of the men said, "He went over to the Crimson Palace. I guess he figgered he could do with a drink or two before the battle."

Rance Slater muttered a startled curse and his eyes narrowed. Something fused startlingly in the back of his mind. Quickly he stepped into the street and started down in the direction of the Crimson Palace. Then it was he saw the man coming up the street to meet him. Bent Markham. A big, slow-moving man with wide, heavy-jawed features. The ranchers who had ridden into town with Markham had moved up onto the walks and Rance was aware that the street was empty save for the big man and himself.

Despite Rance's hurrying steps, Markham had already reached the Crimson Palace Saloon and moved past it. Despair deepened within Rance as he realized it was now too late to verify his suspicions concerning Buck Cardew. There was nothing left for him now but to go through with this showdown between Bent Markham and himself. He tightened his lips and moved ahead, leaving his men straggling behind.

Clouds had hidden the sun earlier, but now had given way to bright sunshine. Rance could feel the sun's hot touch on his right cheek and the side of his neck. He kept his gaze turned slightly to the left in order to avoid the sharpness of its blinding glare. It was the sudden bright flicker of sunlight reflected from the metal barrel of a gun that warned him. His gun came swiftly into his hand, started bucking. . . .

THERE was a startled look on Bent Markham's face. His gun was half-drawn from his holster as he swung around. Three times Rance fired. Then he watched as the Winchester whose barrel protruded from the upstairs window of the Crimson Palace Saloon slid from the grasp of whoever held it, crashed onto the wooden awning of the porch and slid along the roof to clatter loudly onto the steps below.

Markham stared at the rifle in astonishment, then swung around to face Rance. "What in hell's going on here?"

Rance was still gazing at the second floor window of the saloon. "We'll find the answer up there, I think." He slid his gun back into its holster and started for the swinging doors of the Crimson Palace.

A few moments later, when Rance and Markham and a score of others had crowded into Cherry Lamont's upstairs rooms, they found the dancehall woman kneeling beside the body of a dead man. He lay sprawled on his back near the window, his face a crimson smear where one of Rance Slater's bullets had smashed through his nose. Cherry Lamont raised stunned, dazed eyes to the intruders. Her face was drained of color except for the bold splash of carmine rouge on each cheek.

Markham stared at the dead man, his eyes widening. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "It's your foreman, Buck Cardew!"

"I thought it would be," Rance said grimly. "This explains a lot of things."

Bent Markham raised puzzled eyes. "It doesn't explain anything to me."

"It looks like Buck Cardew wanted to make sure neither of us came out of this gun duel alive," commented Rance. "He knew that if either of us was killed by a bullet fired from a hidden rifle, that man's friends would see to it that the other man didn't leave the street alive.

Besides, it would offer the excuse to set off the range war he wanted so badly."

"But why would Cardew want anything like that? What would he stand to gain?"

Rance looked over at Cherry Lamont. "I reckon Cherry could answer that if she was of a mind to The way I figger it, Buck was out to take over Bar-S. In order to do it, he was willing to marry Ann. Later, he probably figgered, convenient accidents could happen to Larry and myself, maybe even Dad, leaving him the boss of the entire ranch. In the meantime, he planned to stir up trouble between the small ranchers and Bar-S, so his hired gunmen could sweep the valley clean, take over all the small outfits. That way he'd fall heir to the entire valley"

"I see," drawled Markham. "Then you figure it was Cardew who murdered your brother?"

Rance sighed. "Ain't no question about it. There was one thing Buck hadn't counted on. Ann was in love with you. That was why he tricked you into becoming my accuser at that rustling trial. Later, when he found that Ann still wasn't willing to marry him, he dry-gulched Larry and tried to make you look like the guilty man Isn't that the way it happened, Cherry?"

Cherry Lamont had risen to her feet. She stared at Rance with dull, listless eyes. "Why ask me? How should I know?"

"Because you were Cardew's partner in this whole deal. I know that now. When Cardew discovered that I wasn't convinced Markham had killed my brother, he had to resort to some trick to make us shoot it out. So that night he rode into town and turned over to you the watch he had taken from Larry's dead body at the time of the murder He told you to say that one of Markham's men had lost it over the gambling tables. Isn't that right?"

For a moment, Rance saw a spark of hatred glow in the woman's green eyes. Then it faded, as suddenly as it had come. She said, in a tired voice, "Sure, I lied to you about the watch I loved Buck Cardew. I would have done anything he asked me. But you'll have a hard time finding a jury that'll believe I knew anything about—about the rest of it."

"That remains to be seen," said Rance harshly. "Because of your lies Will Dockett is dead. He didn't believe your story and Cardew was afraid he might uncover the truth if he rode out to Markham's place So he killed him too."

Bent Markham broke in "Just when did you figure this all out?"

"Just a minute or two before I started down the street toward the showdown with you. You see as we were riding into town I noticed a queer thing Buck Cardew had his Winchester along He was the only man to bring a rifle and that set me to wondering Then later when the time for action came he had disappeared. Someone said he'd gone to the Crimson Palace and suddenly I remembered how Bill Duffy had hinted, on the day I came back to town, that Cherry had found herself someone she liked better while I was gone Something clicked in my mind and I knew he was the man who'd taken my place in Cherry's affections. That made all the rest of the pieces fall into place I knew right then what was in the cards."

Markham's eyes were thoughtful. "You say Ann would still be in love with me if she didn't think I was a murderer?"

Rance allowed a faint grin to creep across his face. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised. You care to ride back to the ranch with me and find out?"

A wide grin broke across Markham's wide-jawed features. "You bet! You know, Rance, I always figured you'd make me a dandy brother-in-law!"

THE END

Once a Horse-Thief—

The Blackfeet were raiding. . . .

By DeWITT NEWBURY

Any good Indian, trapper Magee knew, would rather steal a horse than eat. But when his pack animals vanished a second time, Magee could smell the dishonest fingers of the renegade called The Duck . . . for what self-respecting brave would steal from himself?

TONE MAGEE led his crew through Bull's Eye Pass, coming out of the mountains south of Clark Fork. When he pulled rein in the last timbered valley, he could see open country below.

It was a fine sight. The grass was al-

ready high, and there was a line of fresh greenery along the river. He looked eastward with narrowed eyes.

He didn't see any buffalo. But he saw something else—a camp in the bottom, near Bull's Eye Creek.

Tone turned his whiskered chin and sent back a bellow of laughter. "By Whango! There's the Company gang, bushed up! Seems like they struck hard luck."

His cronies came crowding up behind him. Six weather-bitten men in greasy buckskins, each riding a pony and leading a couple of pack-mules. They were free trappers who had done well on the spring hunt.

They echoed Tone's laughter, and Trotter Jukes swore happily. "Hell and gravy! No critters, no outfit a-tall! The Injuns have cleaned 'em, sure, and it serves 'em right!"

There were a dozen campers below, huddled around shelters of brush and bark. Men from Fort Union, the Company post on the Missouri, they had followed Tone's party until given the slip a month ago.

They were more used to trading for skins than trapping them, and had tried to learn by spying on the mountain men. And now they were in trouble! Tone Magee howled like a wolf, kicked his Cayuse pony and went clattering down the slope. The six others followed, all howling, all firing their flintlocks in the air.

Startled, the Company men jumped away from their smoky cook-fire. Some got up from the ground, or crawled out of the bark shelters, clutching guns nervously.

They lowered the gun muzzles sheepishly when the horses and mules came to a sliding halt, and the riders shouted greetings.

Tone sat tall in the saddle, grinning at the campers. He saw river hands, trade clerks, and some of the roughs who handled drunken Indians. A lot of regular trading-post scum! Their leader was Le Duc, a Frenchy from Canada. He knew the river, he knew canoes and keel-boats. He didn't know the high country.

"Hi-yi!" Tone yelled. "What's hit ye, Duck? You lost us fellers, awhile back. Have ye lost yourselves now?"

Le Duc scowled with bettle brows. He was squat, powerful, with black hair hanging around a black-mustached face. His name meant "the Duke," he claimed; but that was too fancy for mountain men.

"Blackfeet!" he mumbled. "They steal our horses, everything else. We get tired out from walking. Nearly starve!"

Tone whistled. The Blackfeet were ugly customers—about the ugliest—yet they hadn't bothered his party. He said, "Ain't heerd of none prowlin' this Crow country lately. Ain't seen no sign. Besides, I thought they was your friends."

The Frenchman gestured with hairy hands. "They made trade treaty with the Company, yes. Friends w'en they come to the fort. Out here, damn' devil thieves!"

"See 'em, did ye?" Tone asked. "Or did they—"

"Non! Oui! They creep in the night. We wake in the morning and—*voila!* Ever'thing gone. Horses and packs, the traps, the skins of the beaver."

"Well, by the three-horned Whangdoodle!" Tone exclaimed in disgust. "Mean to say ye had no hoss guards?"

Le Duc spread his hands. "We know not the need. All ver' tired, ver' sleepy."

"Humph!" Magee shook his shaggy head. "Reckon ye didn't have much beaver to lose. But the Blackfeet out agin? Sure it wasn't Crows?"

Le Duc nodded, his mustaches wiggling like two black snakes. *Certainment!* Those Crows are our true friends."

"They're our friends, too," Tone allowed. "Yit we don't trust 'em around

critters. They jist nat'rally hafta steal ponies; that's their law an' gospel. And I s'pose Long Hair's village is still over yonder in the Bighorns."

He swung out of the saddle, grumbling. "Reckon we're obleeged to help ye some. Our hosses need baitin' up, anyway, so we'll bide right here. Hi, boys, make camp! Back a bit, where the ground rises.

MAKING camp was simple. Ponies were unsaddled, mules unloaded. The packs of beaver and bags of rattling traps were stacked, blankets and robes thrown down. The animals were staked out along the creek.

In a little while Tone went to the other camp, shouldering a skin-wrapped bundle. "Jerked deer-meat," he said. "That's all we got left."

The Company men crowded around eagerly. One, a lathy, fuzzy-faced youngster, hugged himself. "Belly's caved in! We shot a elk three days ago, but 'twas old—all skin 'in' bones."

"We'll git some buffler soon," Tone answered. "They'll be driftin' north through the basin. Then you fellers can cure your share an' start for Union."

"Come with us!" Le Duc urged. "Bring your skins to the fort, and you get seven dollars a plew!"

Tone shook his head again. "Since when have they been more'n six?" he countered. "No, sir, we'll git top prices at the Rondyvoo. Your Company will be there, along with the Rocky Mountain Company and the Independents, all biddin' agin each other. It'll be next month on the Green River, and we aim to mosey down."

The Frenchman waved his hands. "Will you lend us horses, then, or mules? Sell them? It's a long way to Fort Union!"

"Guess ye'll jist hafta wear out your moccasins," Tone grunted. "We've got a heft of plews to pack. And supplies."

Deaf to persuasion, he turned back to his own camp. The American Fur Company was a tricky outfit, he thought, with tricky agents. They weren't satisfied any longer to stay at the posts and trade. They were moving out now, invading the mountains.

And—as well as beaver—they were trying to trap men better than themselves. To hire them away from the Rocky Mountain Company, and to lure free trappers. Why, the Duck had offered wages to Tone's party, before he had begun spying. Dirty wages!

Yes, he was a rascally one. And there was that mulatto, Beckwourth, who had been sent to sweeten up the Crows, and who had succeeded so well that he'd been made a chief, almost equal to Long Hair himself. . . .

Magee had the last spell of guard that night. Mountain men always watched their horses with extra care when raiders were on the prowl.

He wondered about the Blackfeet again as he circled the picketed animals, rifle cradled on one arm. Of course they were always raiding the Crow country. And of course they'd tackle any white men they found.

But why hadn't they lifted a few scalps, instead of just sneaking off with the loot?

Because of the trade treaty, perhaps. Yet it didn't seem natural for Blackfeet to remember that, away from the fort. If they were to jump Tone's camp, now, there'd be a fight as usual.

They didn't. There was no alarm, and he forgot the puzzle when daylight spread over the open ground beyond the pass. Climbing up to a higer slope, he watched the wide basin: a bit of prairie broken by stony hills, with the Bighorn Mountains on the eastern rim.

He saw dark, moving dots out there. Buffalo—in no great herd, but singly and in groups—were wandering up from the

south, slowly moving toward him.

The camp was stirring before long—men rolling out of robes and blankets, wolfing a little food, snapping rifle locks and setting new flints. Le Duc came hurrying over, both hands fanning the air.

"Tres bien!" he called. "You give us more powder, eh? Let us ride your mules? We get plenty meat!"

Tone Magee had a different notion. "That don't shine," he drawled. "How handy are your greenhorns? We need eight, ten fat cows—and sure shots to drop 'em. Your crowd can jist bide here an' watch our hosses. We'll git the meat."

He spoke to his own men. "You stay with 'em too, Trotter. We won't ride; the buffler are spread out and eatin' quiet. We'll scout 'em."

That satisfied all but Trotter. The others nodded, and Snake River Sam squinted down the valley. "Wind's right an' cover's right. Oughta nail two apiece afore they break."

"Enough for everybody. Have your gang hustle firewood, Duck, and they'll soon have beef to cure. Come on, boys! Hi-yi-yi!"

An hour later the six men were creeping from the fringe of timber, out into the grassy basin. Well separated, each was stalking one of the scattered groups of big, hump-backed animals.

Tone was making for a bunch of two young cows, an old one with a calf, and a huge bull. With bullets in his mouth and powder-flask tied high on his chest, he slipped along carefully. He had stuck grass on his wide hat, and moved from one clump of prairie growth to a close one.

He worked closer, closer, until the buffalo were only fifty yards away. And now he was safely lodged behind a bush. He eased up his Hawkins rifle, made sure of flint and priming, and peered through the bush.

The brutes were still grazing peacefully. The bull lifted his great head to sniff and shake his matted beard, then dropped it to the grass again. He was a mean old fellow, half as big as a mountain and twice as tough.

The young cows were Tone's meat. He had to wait though, until they turned broadside, then he slid his rifle through the bush and fired.

The smoke blew back in his face, and Tone dodged to reload before looking at the game. When he looked, the buffalo were still there. Stupid critters, often they didn't scare unless they smelled you.

That cow had gone down on her knees and staggered up again. Now she was just standing, dying on her feet, while the others nosed her curiously.

Tone aimed at the second young cow and fired, dodged under the smoke to reload.

He dashed in the powder, spat a bullet down the barrel, thumped his rifle on the ground to prime it. He heard a tremendous grunting and snorting, a rumble like thunder. The ground quivered under him.

Tone jumped aside, sprawling his length just in time as the big bull charged into the gun smoke.

He saw the bush uprooted by the shaggy beast, and branches, dirt and pebbles rained in a bruising shower. The bull was going too fast to turn, and thundered by.

It stopped when it could, whirled around. Tone was on his feet by that time. He saw the bull's great lowered head, its mountainous hump. He saw the ferocious, white-rimmed eyes, the forward-pointing horns, sharp and shining like steel.

You couldn't shoot a bull in the head; your lead would just flatten on the bone. You couldn't break its neck; your bullet would be lost in the matted mane or heavy hump. And if you broke a leg, it would charge on three legs.

You could do just one thing. Jump

aside again and make a flank shot. Only you'd likely have to shoot two or three times, and you'd have to load fast.

Tone knew how. He sprang to his left as the buffalo came rumbling and snorting, aimed just behind the big tufted shoulder.

That didn't stop the brute. It whirled and charged again. But Tone was ready; had poured the powder, spit the ball, slammed the gun-butt on the ground. Once more he leaped sideways and shot.

It took five more bullets to drop that bull. By then Tone was so tuckered that he sat down, gasping to catch his wind.

THE HUNT was over. The buffalo were off at last, running away eastward with lumbering speed. Eleven had been killed.

The hunters were hungry. They butchered two cows, rolling them over on bellies and bent legs to carve the humps. Before long a chip fire was burning, lumps of beef sizzling on sticks.

"Trotter must be plumb famished," Tone said, wiping grease from his whiskers. "We'll tote in some meat, and fetch the mules for full loads."

They rambled back to camp, talking and laughing, each man burdened with a skin-wrapped bundle. When they turned into the pass, Snake River Sam raised a whoop.

"Halloo, Trot! Whet your teeth! Prime cow beef, fat an' juicy!"

No answer. No sound at all from either camp. The six hunters paused for a moment, listening, wondering, then broke into a lope. In another minute they stopped again.

There were no sprawling, lounging figures around the bark shelters. Le Duc's men were gone. Neither were there any horses or mules beside the creek—nor any bales and bags farther up the bank!

Tone Magee spoke first. "By pitchforks an' hellfire, the Company gang has foxed us! And what's come to Trotter? If they've flattened him, I'll have every one o' their lousy scalps!"

All six yelled then, and went splashing across the creek, up the slope. They found nothing there, amongst the sparce timber, except the ashes of their fire and a few scattered blankets. Then Tone stumbled over a prone body.

Trotter Jukes was lying face down across his rifle, trussed with pack-rope, a bloody bruise on his head.

Tone slid out his butcher knife and cut the ropes. "A hatful o' water here!" he ordered.

The unconscious man came around with a dousing of creek-water. He sat up, gasping and shaking his sore, dripping head. His next move was to fumble for his rifle.

"What happened?" his friends were demanding. "How'd they git ye? How'd ye come to let 'em?"

At first he mumbled, then his voice cleared. "Didn't let 'em. They jist done it! The Duck come a-jabberin', wantin' to buy me. Says the Company needs a handy trapper. I says I needs one, too, and I'm him."

"What then?" Snake River asked. "Git mad, did he?"

"Oh, no. One o' his rapscallions had stepped up to listen, as sociable as you please. Unexpected, this feller heaves his gun-bar'l. Wham! The sun set mighty sudden."

A chorus of oaths, and the group lapsed into silence. They were afoot in the rough country. The whole fur-take of winter and spring was lost. Even their traps were gone. And the Rendezvous would be next month, on the Green!

But, of course, not a man there was accepting the loss.

A little dried-up veteran—Bad Barney—voiced the thought. "Dunno how greenhorns, even, could be sich fools! They'll leave a plain trail. Can't all ride, neither, 'cause the mules is packed heavy."

"I was the fool," Tone gloomed. "Shoulda tooken the Duck with us; kept an eye on the sneaker, at least. Cuss me out, boys!"

Nobody cussed him. "No, 'twas my fault," Trotter said, lurching to his feet. "I shoulda watched out. We'll chase 'em to Union, though, if need be. Raise a powerful rumpus there!"

"Now you're whoopin'!" Tone agreed. "We can lope as fast as them, an' a dam' sight farther. But first we better got more meat and jerk it."

Bad Barney was right, as they found when they set out next morning. The thieves' trail could be read with half an eye.

The hoof and foot tracks led northward through timber, then out along Clark Fork. All day the trailers slogged on, over rolling prairie, up and down stony hills, sometimes following the sandy river shore. They made a late camp in a clump of cottonwoods, and were off again at dawn.

And within a few hours they had caught the runaways in another stand of cottonwoods.

TONE'S men were approaching it in single file, padding along steadily. Loaded with their hide bundles of meat, but with rifles ready for either game or enemies.

Magee was in the lead. Suddenly he halted, rifle raised. A man had stepped from among the trees and was coming to meet them. Le Duc, unarmed, with both hands in the air.

"Don't shoot!" the Frenchman begged. "I make peace talk!"

"By the bull-horned Beelzebub!" Tone shouted. "I oughta blow your head off! No need to palaver. Jist hand over our critters an' packs—and the scut who lammed Trotter!"

"It was of a necessity, our action," Le Duc pleaded. "You had refused to help us enough. We were very desperate."

"Necess'ty be damned! What about our necess'ty? Hand 'em over!"

Le Duc's heavy face was pallid, his eyes sickly with fear. "We would do so if we could, but we cannot. The Blackfeet have come again. We have nothing left! Nothing!"

So there it was. Once more the mountain men found a bewildered, dejected crew, a plundered camp. Only this time the raiders had made a clean sweep. Even the guns were gone.

"Dad throttle ye!" Bad Barney growled. " 'Twasn't enough to lose your own outfit. Ye had to lose ourn, too?"

"I'd say to blow 'em all to hell," Snake River fumed. "But 'twould be a waste of powder an' ball."

The Company men had nothing to say. They crowded around Le Duc for protection, and wouldn't look anybody in the eye.

Tone Magee was grim but calm. "No, boys," he said. "We won't waste powder, nor time neither. These idjits ain't worth a good spit! Spread out now, let's read the sign."

After a while he came back to Le Duc, who was biting his knuckles under a cottonwood.

"It's as plain as Bible print to a preacher," he reported. "The Injuns been scoutin' after you all along, t'other side o' the Fork. Last night they swarmed over whilst you all was snorin'. Lifted the stuff, pulled stakes an' led off the critters. They loaded 'em up over yonder, on the sand spit, and went back across.

"But they forded to this side agin, lower down, and headed east. Wasn't no Blackfeet. They was our lovin' friends, the Crows, and bound for Long Hair's village!"

He looked around at his cronies, ranged grimly behind him. "Yes, sir," he added. "And we're bound there, too."

"We go with you?" Le Duc stammered

with eagerness. "We have no guns, can't hunt or fight."

"Tag along if you wanta," Tone told him carelessly. "Be lively, though, for we don't aim to tarry."

"Got a leetle job first," Trotter said, and singled out one of the Company men. A muddy-faced breed who looked this way and that, ready to run.

He started away, but Trotter swung up his heavy-barreled rifle. The breed went down as if struck by lightning.

ANOTHER long day's march, and another after that. With scant rations of meat, with lean bodies growing leaner, moccasins wearing into holes.

Magee wasn't happy. When his cronies had banded together, they had elected him captain, and since then had loyally followed his lead. Now he blamed himself for their disaster.

He meant to retrieve the disaster. Couldn't hope to overtake the scampering Indian thieves, but he could follow them home.

"'Twas a bunch of uppity young bucks," he said. "Well, their chief can manage 'em. And Long Hair's a good Injun; I can talk to him like he was my own gran'daddy."

They tramped on doggedly across the basin, following the pony tracks and the tracks of their own animals. There had been twenty braves in the raiding party, they learned from the signs. And the raiders had moved quickly, hardly stopping to make camp. They must have reached the village long ago.

The trailers were obliged to stop and hunt more food. They shot another buffalo, a couple of antelope, and went on. Le Duc kept up somehow, though he limped, panted and swore. His men were strung out for miles behind; they dragged themselves into camp each night, one by one, and fell down exhausted.

At last — late one afternoon — Tone checked his stride and pointed up ahead.

An Indian sat his pony, motionless on the top of a rocky rise, his greased body glistening in the sun, his two feathers slanted by the breeze. He raised a hand to the white men, whirled and was gone.

"The lookout," Tone said. "O' course he's friendly—and o' course he'll dust right back to town. Our critters an' packs will be outa sight when we git thar!"

An hour or two more of marching—climbing now amongst the hills—and they saw the village in a mountain meadow. Ragged rows of hide lodges were ranged along a stream, a branch of Clark Fork.

They lengthened their stride. But Tone paused, facing three girls who had stepped out of some waterside bushes. Their hair hung wet on their skin smocks; they had been bathing in the creek.

He grinned at the youngest. "Little Owl!" he said in Crow. "You have grown into a woman! I think I must make a marriage talk to your father. Or has Broken Nose already paid the price?"

She giggled, plump and good-natured. "I think you are too poor, Big Hunter," she answered pertly. "You are on foot, tired and hungry. While Broken Nose is rich now—has plenty ponies, furs to trade, everything!" Her eyes turned southward, to the rimming hills.

Tone didn't follow the glance. But he had noticed it.

He used his own eyes as he neared the village. Saw horses picketed before the tepees; and the herd grazing across the meadow, guarded by half-grown boys. Even at that distance he could see that none of his own animals were there.

Then the villagers came swarming around the white visitors, beaming smiles and chattering welcome. Dignified braves with fine faces, their hair—a Crow's pride—carefully oiled and braided. Buxom squaws, neat in embroidered buckskin. Shock-headed, pot-bellied children and barking dogs.

But where were all the young bucks? The braves in their first manhood? Tone didn't see any.

"I have come to smoke the pipe with Long Hair," he announced.

A stout old warrior shook his hand heartily. "Long Hair is in another village," he smiled, "on the Bighorn River. Bloody Arm is chief of this village."

Bloody Arm! The Crows had given that name to Beckwourth, the Company agent, when they adopted him.

Tone smothered an oath in his whiskers, and turned to his men. "Squat in the lodges, boys. Rest up, fill your bellies. Me and the Duck will see what can be done."

THEY found the chief in his tepee, sitting on a grizzly bear robe and smoking a long, stone-bowled pipe. He was wearing a gaudy buckskin shirt, beaded and quilled. An enormous war-bonnet covered his curly head, and his yellow-brown face was striped with red paint.

You had to give him credit, Tone thought as he took a turn at the pipe. A whip-scarred runaway slave, the fellow had somehow made his way to the upper Missouri, found work at Fort Union. And now he was a trusted Company agent—and an Indian chief!

The three passed the pipe around. Le Duc puffed and grunted, settled himself comfortably. He was looking happier now.

At last Tone said, "The ceremonies is over, Jim. Let's talk turkey."

Beckwourth answered in Crow. "My name is Bloody Arm."

"Bloody nothing!" Tone exploded. "Has that Injun foofaraw made ye forget white talk?"

"I earned that name," Beckwourth protested, "fightin' along with these folks. I done counted *coup* on fifty-seven Blackfeets and Cheyennes! Got the scalps to prove it."

"Maybe so," Tone allowed. "But that's got nothing to do with my business." And he told of the raids and robberies.

Beckwourth listened in silence, puffing clouds of acrid smoke. Then he said, "Musta been bad Injuns done you wrong. You can hunt through all our tepees, look over all our ponies. Won't find nothing of yourn."

"Where's all your young bucks gone?" Tone demanded.

"Off a-battlin' the Blackfeets," the chief answered promptly.

"Jim Beckwourth," Tone grated, "I know—as well as you do—that them young hellions stole our outfit! And that they've hid everything away all tight an' snug!"

Le Duc broke in, hands spread wide. "I tol' you it was Blackfeet."

Tone scowled at him. "One thing sure! This here Duck lifted our stuff and lost it! Now, Jim, you send word to your thievin' bucks, wherever they are. Have 'em give back our critters an' packs, and we'll call it quits."

"Can't do it!" Beckwourth declared. "If my Injuns *did* have your stuff, and I gave 'em such orders—why, they'd be mad and wouldn't let me be chief no more. The Company'd turn me loose, too, because we'd lose their trade."

Magee was in a blind pass, he judged, and didn't like it. "What can you do?" he growled.

"I can lend horses to Le Duc and his boys, get 'em back to Union. Can't help you and your boys. Unless you—all engage to serve the Company, same as him and me."

There it was again. The American Fur Company was certainly anxious to hire skilled trappers.

"We'll take no damn' wages," Tone answered as before. "We'll stay free and sell our peltry as we please. And we'll claim our losses from your Boorjwah, your Boss, when we meet him on the Green!"

The threat didn't mean much, he knew.

There was no law in the mountains. Factions and interests were always warring with each other, and almost any trick was fair.

Le Duc was chuckling, his heavy shoulders shaking. "It will be *adieu* then, M'sieu' Magee. You have been one ver' good friend, I kiss the hand!"

MAGEE and his cronies rested for a couple of days, while the friendly squaws made them new moccasins of buffalo hide. All the Crows were friendly, but blandly denied knowledge of any loot.

The girl, Little Owl, had made the only slip. She was wiser when Tone questioned her again.

"How did you know," he asked, "of Broken Nose and his good luck?"

"Because," she smiled, "he had led a war party against our enemies. Surely so brave a warrior has succeeded!"

So the seven trappers went away as they had come. Afoot, with only their rifles and some jerked meat . . . and many weary miles.

It was a bad business, Tone thought morosely. To tramp to the Rendezvous, without a plew to trade! They must refit there, and be hampered, maybe broken, by a load of debt.

He was still cursing himself for that one mistake in judgment. But, even yet, he had not given up. And he hadn't forgotten Little Owl's glance toward the southern hills when she spoke of her brave's new riches.

Tone led his party westward until the village was far enough behind, then changed direction.

It was hard going! They threaded the foothills of the Bighorn Range, climbed the ridges, combed flats and benches, plumbed the ravines. Always scouting cautiously, always searching for sign. There must be a plain trail somewhere; but it was hidden cunningly amongst the mazes.

In the end it was ears, not eyes, that served.

The sounds came on the wind. A gun shot, and another. A scattered fusillade. The throbbing hoot of a war-cry.

"Ruckus yonder!" Tone said, listening and scanning the sky line.

"An all-Injun tussle," Trotter added, "by the yappin'."

Tone slapped his rifle stock. "Something pretty going on, sure as shootin'! Over beyond that next hog-back. Hi-yi! Let's go see!"

They went. Loping until the ground grew too steep, then toeing uphill through a bristly growth of pinions. Crawling when they reached the top.

And now everything was plain. Everything was right in sight!

A smaller ridge lay below, beyond a slanting, eroded gully. Ponies were staked in the gulch where it opened to the right. And along the lower crest, Indians were crouching, sheltered by rocks and trees and fallen trunks. Their bare, paint-smeared bodies shone greasily in the hot light. Their clustered or single plumes fluttered and bobbed. Whoops rose, tremulous and shrill. Guns smoked and thundered.

"By the ringtailed Catamarankus!" Tone muttered. "No mistake this time. The Blackfeet are raidin' for sure!"

They certainly were. They were shooting into the valley beyond the ridge, a regular valley with grass and water in it. Horses and mules were there, too, a considerable herd. And Crows, who were shooting back at the raiders.

"Yon's the hidy-hole, boys!" Tone laughed. "There's our stuff, the whole Company outfit, and all the sneakin' thieves. All in a hole together!"

"Blackfeet nosed 'em out," Snake River grumbled, "quicker'n we did! We oughta let 'em git shot up a leetle."

"Would, only I'm afeared the hosses would git peppered."

TONE surveyed the battle. The Crows were well armed; they had the stolen Company rifles. But the raiders outnumbered them, and were behind cover. The guns kept barking, lead whining, arrows flickering back and forth. And always the yelping cries rose and echoed.

"Reckon we'll take a hand now," he decided. "They're wide open from this side. Cover up well, and choose your marks!"

The mountain men crept away to right and left along the hilltop, mouths filled with extra bullets, powder-flasks hitched higher. The seven rifles spoke together —almost like one long, crackling explosion.

Each nailed its man! A war-bonneted Blackfoot rolled back from his nook on the lower ridge, rolled faster and faster, down into the gulch. Two more leaped up like shot rabbits, to sprawl limply again. Others kicked and floundered, or simply flattened where they crouched.

The fire from behind was a complete surprise. Strung out on their ridge, the braves twisted about to meet it. Again they were blasted. And when, howling, they tried to take cover from the volleys, they were exposed to the fire of the Crow rifles.

Many as they were, they couldn't stand it. Flurried and outshot, they jumped up and raced for their ponies. Yapping like dogs, falling as they ran.

"We could cut 'em all off!" Trotter exulted as he watched the plumed and painted rout that was quartering down the opposite slope.

"Let 'em go, and good riddance!" Tone chuckled. "We've got some Crows to pick."

He whistled through two fingers, waved an arm. His small battle line surged into the gully, dashed up the sharp little ridge and down to the valley floor. Once there, they went forward in a sort of war dance, each man whooping more hideously than any Indian.

The Crows whooped and capered too, in triumph. But most of the young bucks didn't wait to greet the white men. Excited and reckless, wild with sudden victory, they jumped on their ponies. Screaming, kicking and lashing, they tore off to worry the rout.

They wouldn't be back in a hurry, either. Likely they'd chase the raiders all the way home!

Tone Magee shook hands with a stalwart brave whose braids almost touched the ground, and whose face had been handsome until a buffalo's horn had grazed it.

"How, Broken Nose! I see you have found our lost horses, the long-eared ones, and all our property."

Broken Nose looked at the seven trappers, then at the few bucks who had stayed with him. There were a few dead. Only five living, and three of these were wounded.

His beady eyes narrowed to slits, but he smiled. "Enemies stole your wealth, Big Hunter. We took everything back and kept all safe for you."

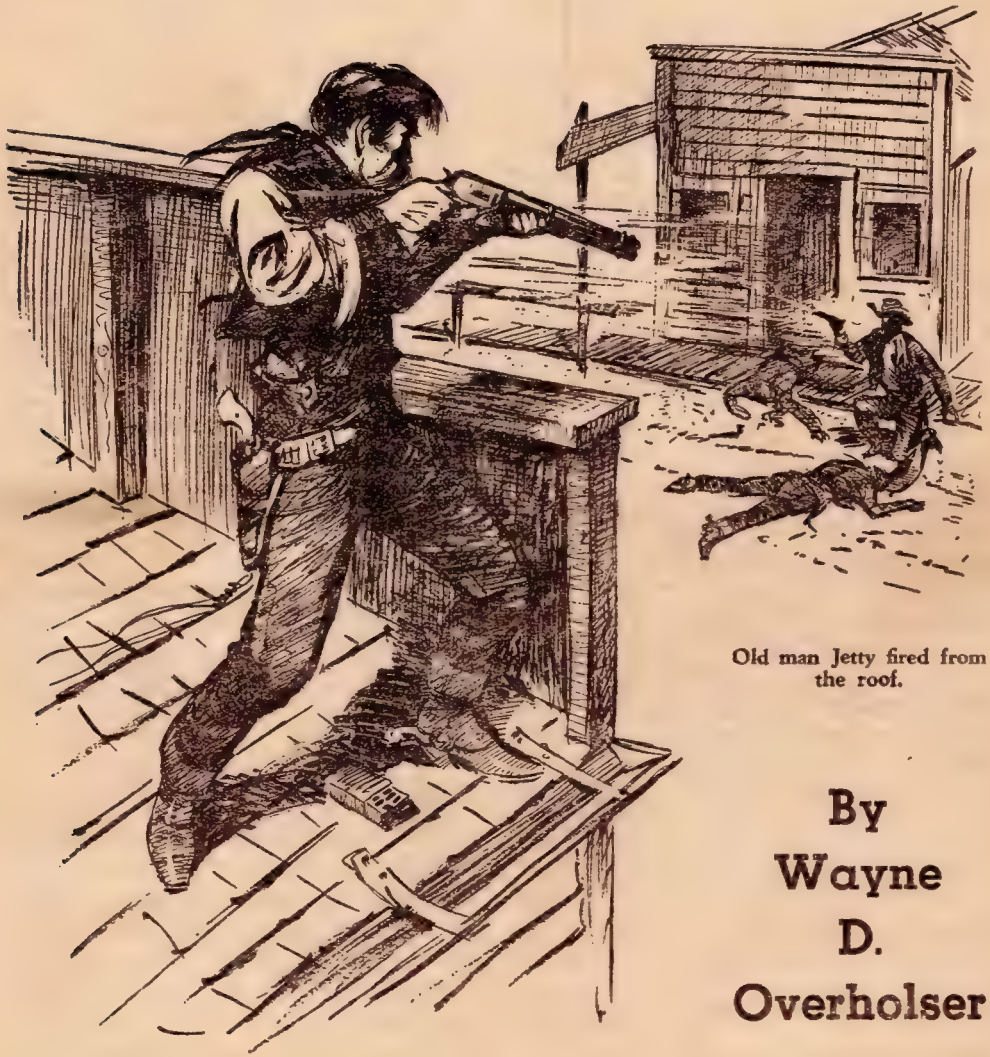
"We thank our Crow friends," Tone nodded gravely. "Ye lie like a copper Judas!" he added in English, smiling inwardly.

"Good!" Broken Nose shook hands again. "You give us presents?"

"There are dead warriors up yonder; you can count *coups* and take their scalps. You can also keep the Company guns, and what horses we do not need for ourselves."

Tone winked at his grinning cronies. "Too many animiles for us to handle. We'll jist take our own, with the best o' the Company critters. And *all* the packs. By the brass-bellied Hippoboomus, we'll do some tradin' at the Rondyvoo, after all!"

HEMP-COLLAR HERO



Old man Jetty fired from the roof.

By Wayne D. Overholser

When the gun-thunder died and the bitter smoke drifted, Sheriff Bill Toomey read clearly for the first time the meaning of that ancient law, "A life for a life!" — in the bullet-smashed body of a man born to hang!

IT WAS not a pleasant morning, for spring had come late to Central Oregon as was its habit. The wind, chilled by its passage across the glaciers hugged between the breasts of the high Three Sisters, rattled the signs marking Pine City's short Main Street, rolled tumbleweeds against the fronts of the buildings until they were hip-high, and fluted

dismally as it shrilled around the eaves. Sheriff Bill Toomey, staring into the street through his office window, thought it was a bitter day in which to die; this day when he had been home from his honeymoon less than twenty-four hours.

Toomey was a square-shouldered man with square-tipped fingers and eyes as gray as the sage that stretched in empty miles eastward across the high Oregon desert to the Deschutes River. On a quiet day Toomey could stand in his office doorway and hear it rushing north to reach the Columbia.

A strange river, the Deschutes, flowing unfettered to empty its clear water into the muddy Columbia. A wild and unruly river typical of this land, an eternal river, gouging and cutting and digging its deep canyon still deeper.

So, too, were the mountains eternal. And the desert, lightly clothed with sage and rabbit brush and bunchgrass. Bill Toomey thought of eternity now, for he was close to dying.

Joe Mann, county commissioner, ducked out of his store, straddled a tumbleweed, and cut across the street in quick, mincing steps. He came into Toomey's office and shut the door against the wind. He said, "Hell of a day, Bill. One of these times I'm going to give my store away and hike back over the Santiam Pass to Albany."

"Don't blow there, I reckon," Toomey said ironically.

Mann laughed as if it were a great joke. "No, but it rains."

Toomey let the silence ride. He didn't like Mann. The storekeeper was soft. He should have stayed in the Willamette valley with its settled life and established law. Soft as the tall valley grass. Soft as the mud that squished under a man's feet.

Mann stood by the window shuffling his feet uneasily, wanting to say something and not finding the words. He cleared his throat. He looked at Toomey's square-cut face and cleared his throat again. Then, as if taking the bull by the horns, he burst out, "The other commissioner and the county judge are in Prineville, but I can take your resignation."

Toomey turned slowly, gray eyes steel hard. He said, "Go to hell."

Mann's face, completely empty of understanding, showed injury. "You ain't got no chance. The Jettys know that or they wouldn't be coming. Nobody'll think hard of you if you ride out."

Toomey could have said that the Jettys would have been licked a long time ago if anybody had stood against them. That was the whole trouble. Nobody had until Toomey had been elected sheriff. They had taken what they wanted—their neighbors' grass or calves or anything else. They would remove a man who stood in their way, and a couple of killings had made their brags stick. But Toomey had other ideas. He had slapped one of their hands into jail for rustling the first time he had any evidence, and the man was there now. It wasn't a thing the Jettys could overlook, so they'd called for a showdown.

Toomey looked at Mann and quickly turned his head. He was typical of the folks who had come to the Deschutes country lately. Soft. You yelled in their faces and they ran like scared wetting pups. Third generation from the pioneers who had settled Oregon City, had organized at Champoeg, had mined gold along the Rogue. That was the way it went. The tough pioneered; their luxury-softened descendents wasted their heritage. The Jettys had been able to take what they wanted because the Joe Manns had bowed before them. And Bill Toomey was to die because he wouldn't bow, and he wouldn't bow because he believed in an authority that was higher than the Jettys, a belief he was willing to die for.

"Go to Hell," Tommey said quietly once again.

MANN scurried out without another word. Toomey looked at his watch. More than an hour yet. The wind might die down. The sand, wind-driven, cut into a man's vision and made tough shooting. He didn't want to die today. There was too much living to be done. His wife Rose was in his thoughts again as she had been so much since he'd come back and had received the ultimatum from the Jettys.

He had won Rose against Hass Krone who had gone bad in spite of all that Toomey and his mother had done for him. Against Phipp Jetty who had mistakenly thought that her love could be bought. Against a dozen men from the desert and down the river and over Prineville way who had said they loved her.

He focused his thoughts on her, picturing her and nursing the picture as the minutes ran out. Golden hair touched by streaks of red, like a sunset behind the snowy mountains across the Deschutes. High breasted, a woman who built a fire in a man's veins that never went out. It had not gone out in Phipp Jetty, who thought that killing Toomey would give him Rose.

The love he shared with Rose was as eternal as a man's soul. She would marry again. That was a necessity of this existence. Some man would give her children, and they would grow up to help tame this land, but they would not be Bill Toomey's children.

Sweat beaded his face. This wasn't good. He felt his nerves tighten. He had seen men face death, but he had not known it would be like this. He reached for his gun and drew it. Slow. Phipp Jetty would get him. If he didn't young Gary would. Or the old man.

No, this wasn't good. *He had to live.* Too much to be done to die. There were too many like Joe Mann who lacked the strength it took to shape the land. Or like the Jetty's—who pushed and kicked and threw their weight around to get what they wanted. Or the toughs like Hass Krone, who had been headed for hell on a bobsled the moment he had been conceived.

Then Toomey thought he saw Hass Krone on the street. He put his gun back into his holster. He wiped a big hand across his face and stared. It was Krone. He had ridden in from the south and racked his horse in front of the Jackpine saloon. A bay. Good animal. Krone would need a horse like that.

It was a miracle that Krone would show up just now, but not the kind of miracle Toomey wanted. He had plenty of trouble without having to worry about Krone. A killer. The kind the Jettys might hire. But the Jettys hadn't hired Hass Krone. Too much had happened when they were kids. Krone wasn't one to forget.

Krone stood on the protected south side of the street, a willow-like man with a brace of guns buckled around his waist, fitting him the way a tight glove fits a woman's hand. He was as ugly of face as he had been when he was a kid. Button nose with two round holes for nostrils. Black eyes slanted a little and set close together. A thin-lipped mouth stretched like a knife blade across his face.

Krone stood motionless, looking along the street while the minutes ticked away. Then he cut across the dust strip to Toomey's office and came in. He shut the door and took a deep breath. "Hell of a country," he said without a greeting. "Dunno why I left Arizona. I cussed it plenty when the damned sun was frying my hide, but I'd as soon fry as freeze."

Toomey said, "Howdy, Hass."

Krone cocked his head. "So you're packing a star these days. Funny how low down a man can get just to make his bacon and beans."

ANGER tugged at Toomey's nerves. This wasn't good, either. Krone could have come back any other day. Any

other day out of the three hundred and sixty-five and it wouldn't have mattered to Bill Toomey. But no, Krone had to pick this day and he had to come into the office to needle him as he always had.

But Toomey held his temper. "Yeah, it is, ain't it? Like you. Throwing lead around for somebody's money."

Krone laughed. The same way he used to laugh. Out of one side of his mouth, the sound harsh. "I'm better off than you are, Bill. No troubles and no worries."

That was like Hass Krone. Never thought about anything or anybody but himself. The anger died in Toomey. Krone had always rubbed him the wrong way, but he had felt a pity for him, too.

"A cheap way to live," Toomey said.

"That's the difference between you and me." Krone rolled a smoke, twisted it with long supple fingers and sealed it. "Take me. No conscience. Why? Because a conscience is something your parents pound into you. What'd I have? A no-good mother. I never knew who my dad was. So I get a hell of a kicking around, living in alleys, sleeping in livery stables, knowing more things that folks call bad by the time I was ten than you know now. So I don't have a conscience and I earn my living with a gun. Same as any business. You get used to killing same as a butcher gets used to beefing steers."

Hass Krone had always been given to bragging, but if the stories that had filtered north were true, he wasn't bragging now. Toomey nodded. "You didn't live out of alleys all the time."

"No." Krone wiped a match across the top of Toomey's desk and lighted his cigarette. "Your ma baked the best damned mince pies I ever et, but feeding me didn't work. I reckon both of you thought that filling my belly would make me good, but there just ain't no hook up between my belly and what I do."

Toomey sat down at his desk. He filled his pipe, watching Krone and wondering what had brought him back. There was nothing here for him. Never would be any more than there had been when he was a kid.

Krone laughed again. He said, as if sensing the question in Toomey's mind, "You want to know why I came back? A couple of reasons. For one thing I wanted to see Rose." He raised a hand when Toomey started to speak. "I know. You're married. You surprised everybody and sneaked off for your honeymoon. When you got back, Phipp sent word to get out of town before noon today."

"How'd you hear all that?" Toomey demanded.

"News like that gets around. I picked it up before I hit town, so I jogged my horse up and rode on in. The Jettys will plug you and then Rose won't be married."

"She never liked you," Toomey said. "You know that."

"Yeah, but I want to see her anyhow." Krone mocked him with his grin. "Things are different with me than when I left. I've got a reputation now. That might make a difference."

"Get out of town," Toomey said in a burst of violence. "If you ain't out by sundown, I'll jug you for vagrancy. I mean it!"

"By sundown Doc Stallcup will have you ready for burying." Krone flipped his cigarette toward the spittoon. It missed and lay smoking on the floor. "You know, Bill, I'm glad it's working this way. If the Jettys didn't plug you, I'd have to."

"I thought you didn't have a conscience. That shouldn't worry you."

"It don't, much. But I'd still hate to plug you. I remember all the whoopdedoo when you pulled me out of the Deschutes. The old timers said nobody ever got out of the damned river alive once they got chilled, but we did."

TOOMEY remembered, too. Phipp Jetty had always hated Krone because it didn't seem to matter how many times he pounded the kid's face into jelly, he never really licked him. The next day Hass Krone would swing on Jetty the first time Jetty called him a bastard. Finally, in a burst of temper, Phipp Jetty had shoved him off the bridge into the river, yelling, "That's the end of one bastard." Toomey had dived in and pulled Krone out. Some said he was a hero and some said he was a fool to risk his life for a kid who'd be better off dead.

"What was the other thing you came back for?" Toomey asked.

"Just to kick anybody in the shins who kicked me." Krone stared out of the window, the old hatreds and bitternesses washing back from the recesses of his memory. "Beating a kid who didn't have no friends is one thing. Beating Hass Krone who's killed six men on the border is something else."

That was true. Joe Mann and the rest of Pine City's population would walk soft and easy in front of Hass Krone. If Bill Toomey lived until sundown, he'd face the job of running Krone out of town, for his coming meant trouble, and Toomey was a good sheriff because he had a talent for smelling trouble and turning it to one side.

Toomey was suddenly conscious of the silence. The wind had died. He laid his cold pipe on the desk and walked to a window. The pines along the river were not swaying as they had been and the signs were not rattling. He looked at his watch. Almost twelve.

Krone was watching him, amusement in his black eyes. "Your mother used to try to save my soul. Maybe she saved yours, but mine gave her quite a tussle. I said you was a fool then, Bill. I say you're a fool now."

No one in town had volunteered to take a deputy's badge and help handle the Jettys. Joe Mann had offered to accept his resignation. That was the nearest thing to help he'd had, and it was worse than nothing because it showed how completely Mann misunderstood the issue. Now, with time running out, he wondered with deep bitterness if Hass Krone was right.

"Well," Krone prodded, "ain't you got nothing to say?"

"No. A man lives by his standards, Hass. You've got yours. I've got mine."

"Oh hell," Krone said in deep disgust. "Living's the important thing. Don't give me no syrup about having to tame the country. We all look out for ourselves. You jumped into the river to be a hero, not just to save my hide."

Toomey gave no answer. The Jettys were coming into town on the desert road now. He checked his gun. He said, "Get over to the Jackpine, Hass. I've got some shooting to do."

Krone swore. "And some dying. Damn it, Bill. Use your head. Ride out of town. Let the Jettys have it."

"I can't. Phipp told me that if I married Rose and came back to town, he was coming after me."

"Rose know?"

Toomey shook his head. "I couldn't tell her."

"That all there is to this?"

"No. The real reason's back there." Toomey waved toward the cells. "I jugged one of their hands for rustling. If I make a run for it, that man goes free. You don't make law mean anything that way."

Krone snorted his derision. "Who cares about law? Get your fun when you can. It's a short life anyhow."

Toomey eased his gun into leather. "A few men have the job of making law mean something. I'm one of them." He gave Krone a straight look and brought his gaze back to the street. "You wouldn't understand about that, but you aren't fooling me, neither. You're not as tough as

you let on. My mother she shaped you, just like she done me."

PHIPP JETTY and young Gary were in the street now, riding slowly, Phipp on his chestnut, Gary on a black, the best animals on the desert. Stolen from Nevada, some said, but there had never been any proof and no Nevada sheriff had shown up looking for them.

Neither of the Jetty's glanced at the jail. They rode straight up, guns on hips, Winchesters in their scabbards, their bold hawk-nosed faces typical of all Jetty faces. They dismounted in front of the bank and stood there looking into the windows, their backs to the jail.

Toomey said, "I was just thinking, Hass. From what I hear you always give a man you're going to kill an even break."

"Sure. No sport shooting a man in the back."

"Then you're admitting what I've been saying. You've got your standards and you live by them the same as I live by mine."

Krone grunted a sour oath. "You're sure tough to convince." He moved to the other window and looked out at the Jetty boys. "Gary was just a wet-nosed kid when I left, but he looks like Phipp now, and Phipp ain't changed a bit." He scratched the end of his chin. "I don't like the looks of it, Bill. Where's the old man?"

"I was wondering," Toomey said.

"Phipp ain't the kind to take chances," Krone warned.

Phipp Jetty turned, his watch in his hand. He yelled, "Come out and take it in the guts, Toomey."

Toomey opened the door and stepped across the board walk. The sun, noon high, laid a hammering heat upon the street. The wind was entirely gone. It was still. He could hear the whisper of the Deschutes as it rushed toward the Columbia. Like humans, it hurried toward its destiny, not knowing why, but always hurrying.

He thought of Rose, wondering who her second husband would be. Then he pushed the vagrant thoughts from his mind. Gary was still facing the bank as if he had no part in this thing. Phipp was watching Toomey move toward him, right hand splayed over gun butt, watching like the hawk that every Jetty man resembled.

From somewhere down the street a man coughed, a loud and disturbing sound that flowed along the street. Toomey's boots stirred the dust. It rose around him. The sweat on his face washed in dribbles down his cheeks and made mud of the dust.

Toomey was straining every nerve, every instinct that cried for self-preservation. He was as fast as Phipp. He could shoot as straight. If it were just Phipp he would not worry, but he knew the Jetty's too well to hope they'd give him a fair fight. Hass Krone had called it right. Phipp was not the kind to take chances.

Gary whirled, a gun in his hand, and fired. It was that sudden. Without warning. This was the trap, the way it had been planned, and there would be nobody to arrest young Gary for murder.

Toomey grabbed for his gun and pulled it. He felt the tug of Gary's bullet along his side. *This was it.* Gary was a good shot. He wouldn't miss again. Toomey's gun was clear of leather and coming up when Gary's second bullet caught him in the thigh. It chopped his leg out from under him as effectively as an ax stroke. He tumbled into the dust, dropping his gun as he fell, and the dust lifted around him in a shifting cloud. The next bullet would be the end. They had plenty of time. Phipp would be in it.

THEN there were other guns in the fight. Someone behind Toomey. Hass Krone. Toomey knew without looking. He fumbled for his gun. Phipp lurched and fell, grabbing his shirt and crying out

in agony as death made clay of his body. Gary fell against the bank wall and rolled and tried to lift his gun. Then his head dropped against the boards of the walk.

Then it was still. There was only the smell of burned powder, the bursts of blue smoke. Toomey had his gun then and he lifted himself to the knee of his good leg, watching Phipp and Gary for movement. That was when the Winchester let go and the street was alive again with gun fire.

It was old man Jetty, wild in his anger, standing on the bank roof, the .30-30 coming to his shoulder for a second shot. Toomey, tilting his gun, brought him off the roof in a pinwheeling fall. He hit the walk, the boards cracking under him with pistol-like sharpness, and lay motionless.

Joe Mann and the others who had stayed back until the danger was gone, came like pups to sniff and yap about it all.

"Hass Krone," a man said. "Somebody done a good job when they got him. Born to hang, he was."

"Wonder why he came back?" another asked.

Hands reached for Toomey. Doc Stallcup said, "You've got a bad leg, Bill. Here, let Joe help you."

Toomey swore and shook them off. He crawled through the dust, leaving a snake-like path behind him, with dark blood on it. He didn't know how bad his leg was, but he wasn't thinking about that. He was wondering about Hass Krone.

He reached Krone's body and looked into the ugly little face, the black eyes staring blindly.

"Damn it, Bill," the medico was saying. "You'll bleed to death if you don't let us get you out of here."

"Krone always hated the Jettys," a man said. "Came back when he heard Bill was shooting it out with 'em today. Came back so he'd have Bill's help."

It wasn't that way. Hass Krone, living by his standards, paid his debts. He had owed his life to Bill Toomey. So Bill Toomey had his life as a gift. He thought of Rose who would mother his children, children who would make him immortal. They would help him tame this land, a land that would know what law meant. He turned his head to look up at the hovering medico. He said, "All right, Doc."

RED PRAIRIE DEATH

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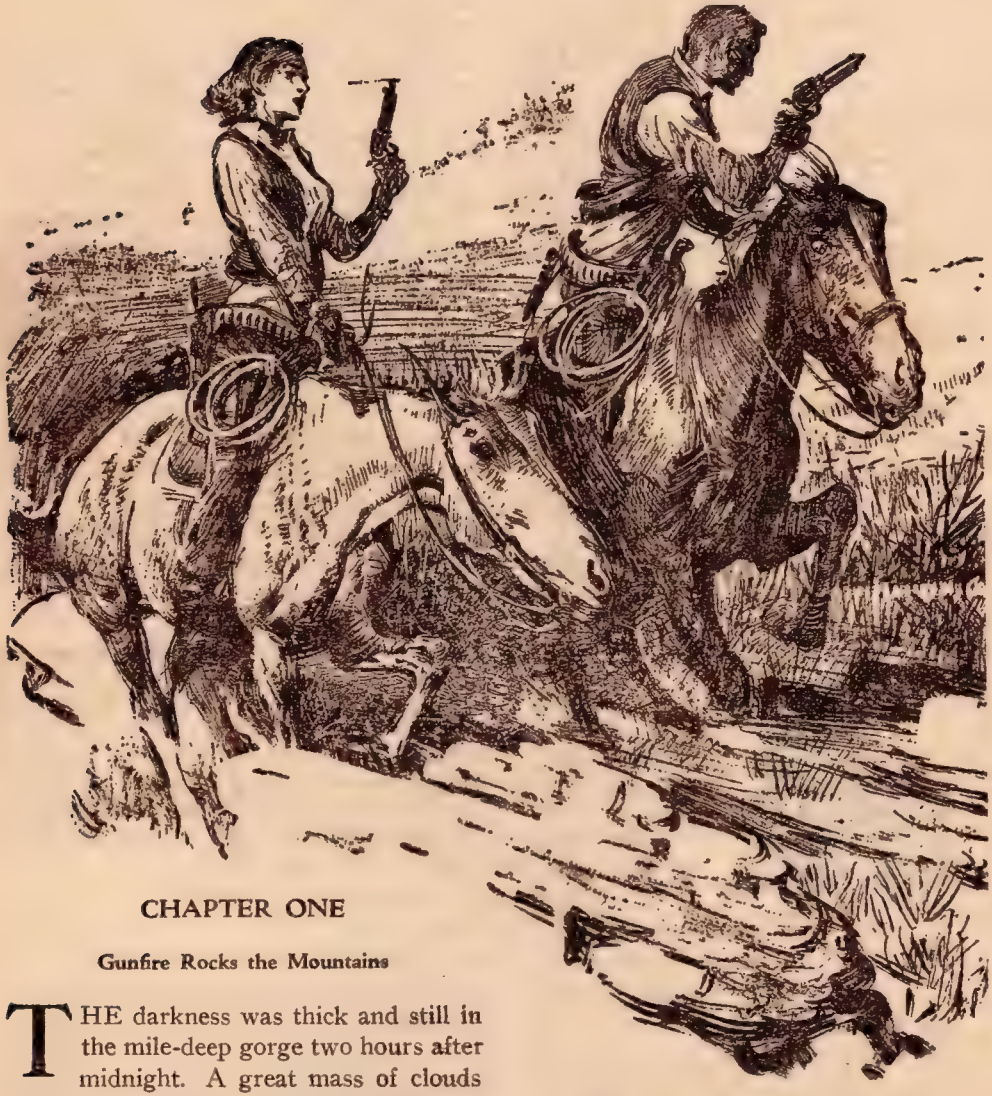


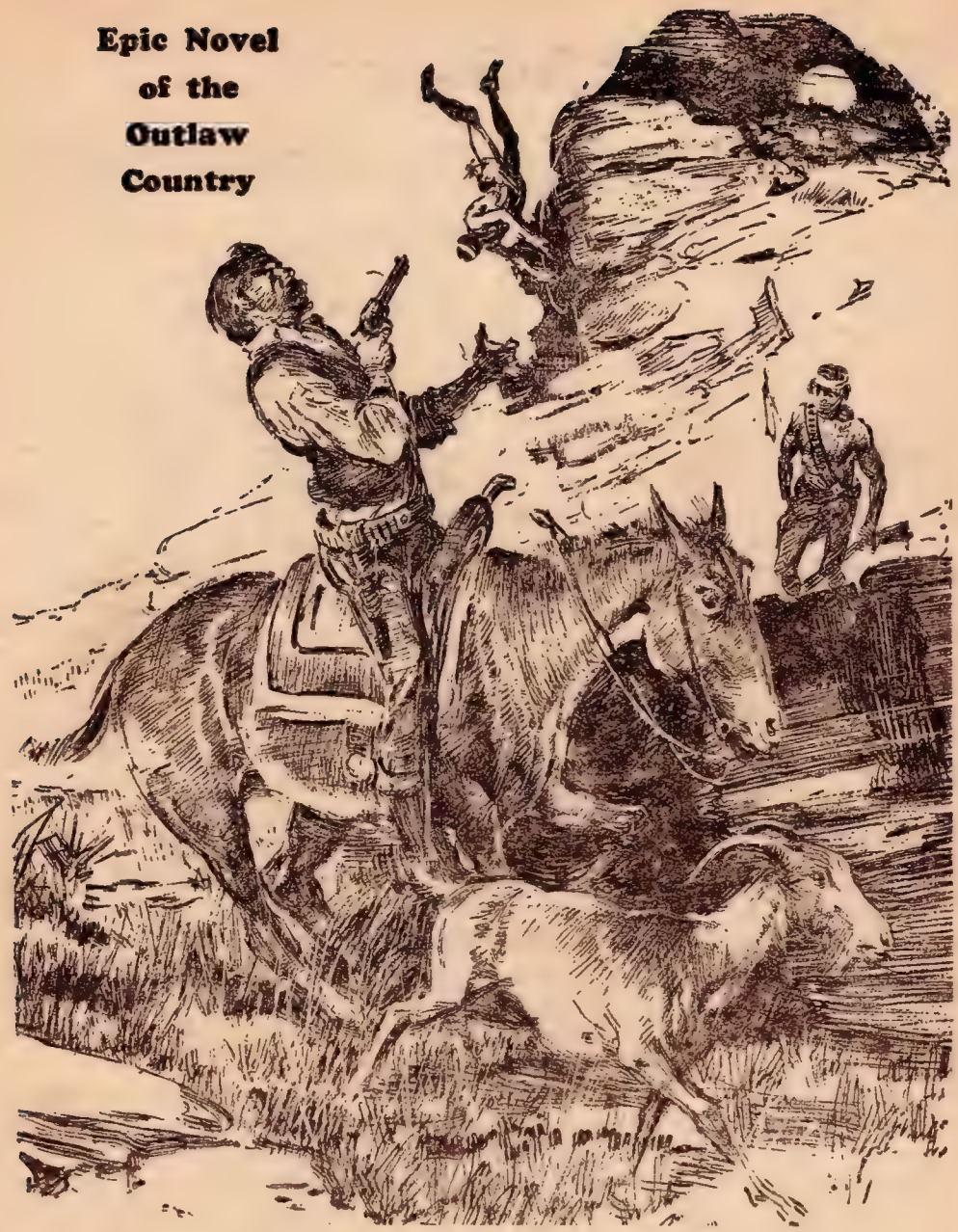
They swung eastward, toward the heaviest fighting.

CHAPTER ONE

Gunfire Rocks the Mountains

THE darkness was thick and still in the mile-deep gorge two hours after midnight. A great mass of clouds had blanketed the sky, hiding the half-moon and the stars. The only sound was the soft whispering of the tiny stream

Epic Novel of the Outlaw Country



High in the wild, desolate Four Corners Country, the dying outlaw told Long Jim Lassiter, was God's Pocket . . . where a man on the wrong side of the law might at last find peace. But first he must walk through the Valley of Rattlesnakes, then fight his way past savage redskins, whose bloodthirsty gods would accept only human sacrifices!

under the towering old trees beside the near-dead campfire where the long figure of a man lay rolled in his blankets with a big Texas saddle for a pillow.

Long Jim Lassiter had not slept for more than an hour despite the quiet, and the fact that he had been dog-tired from a dawn-to-dusk day in the saddle of the horse that had carried him deeper and deeper into the wild, utterly lawless Four Corner Country where the corners of Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico came together. Here were three thousand square miles of raw wilderness, much of it never seen by a white man's eye, and some of it so deep and rugged even a mountain goat could not get through.

Last night he had camped on a wind-swept shelf of bare rock overhanging a rushing river that had looked like a slender silver thread in the distance below. The little spot here had been found after miles of twisting and turning in a knife-narrow crack between towering cliffs. But beyond, if his map of the old Outlaw Trail was true, he would eventually find wider country, well-watered, full of grass, and teeming with fish and game.

Sometimes he had doubted the map, feeling that old Pence Clark, the dying outlaw, had forgotten parts of the trail. In places it had shown everything wrong, several times making him turn back and try another route.

"Only one place is shore," had muttered the old man just before death had settled over him. "Keep plumb clar of Rattlesnake Valley. Strange an' queer heathen things go on thar, I been told. Unhuman, they say, though it's been damn mighty few whites whut's come back to tell atter seein' it."

With sleep impossible now, Lassiter sat up and rolled a cigarette. His horse stirred, then moved closer, restless for some unknown reason.

Was the bay aware of something in the clinging darkness and silence? Lassiter could see nothing more than sixty feet away. And he could hear nothing, not even the whisper of the little stream. Snuffing out his cigarette after only a minute of smoking, he dropped back, head again on his saddle. In another minute he was up again and covereing the saddle completely with the end of a blanket.

But it was useless. It had come to him that the saddle had been strangely turned into a sounding board, and either faint sounds or a weird vibration was coming out of it from some distant source. He rolled the saddle aside and lay with his head against the ground. In a minute he was certain that he was sensing the faint pound of far-away drums tapping at the base of his skull. He shifted right and left, escaping them for short spells, and now and then he dozed. At the first tinge of dawn he came up, flinging his blankets aside and reaching for his clothing hanging from a tree limb above his head.

With the bay grazing and the cloud parting overhead, he kindled up the fire and put on his tiny coffee pot, then he was broiling a fat sagehen he had shot the afternoon before, having cut a forked stick to hold it above a bed of red coals. Flapjacks followed in a small pan with a folding handle. Cowboy-fashion, he squatted and ate, listening for the sounds he had heard.

The bay came up behind him, nudging him with his muzzle, for the usual morning hand-out. Three big flapjacks were already cooling on a flat rock beside the fire. He had them, and thirty minutes later, having carefully washed out the last of the fire, they were leaving the place and going on up the east bank of the stream.

IN AN hour the sun had grown bright and warm on the rocks that towered above them. They climbed a dangerously steep slope for another hour, Lassiter out of the saddle and carefully picking the way to avoid causing a sudden avalanche of

rocks. At last they were staring down at a mile-deep, bowl-shaped valley with ancient cliff dwellings in the distance.

He had seen many of these odd places, said to be eight or ten thousand years old. Following the rule here as well as elsewhere, they were well-hidden, as if the ancient people who had once inhabited them were constantly afraid of being found by enemies.

Swinging to the left, still walking, he headed down a wide shelf, pausing here and there to stand and stare again. Below him, all around from wall to wall of the valley, there was only barren desolation except for a few dwarfed trees, a thin bush or a struggling clump of weeds at the edge of the stream. The rest looked like a valley of bubbles lifted by the raging heat of some volcano, thousands upon thousands of years before, and left to cool and harden, each with a small hole at its top.

As he neared the lower end of the shelf he caught sight of a narrow break in the high wall to the left of the cliff dwellings. Through that break he caught a glimpse of a fertile second valley, and knew it as the grain and vegetable gardens of the people hiding here from the rest of the world. Then he stopped, staring again, pale eyes gettting larger and larger.

"Rattlesnake Valley!" He hissed the words, glancing at the bay as if warning him of the danger just below and ahead. "Millions of the damned things, if they keep coming like that!"

The sun was striking those bubble-like shapes down there. Long brown objects were appearing, crawling from the thousands of holes, each going up to the top of its bubble to slowly wind itself into a coil —the largest rattlesnakes he had ever seen.

"I seed it just once." He could remember old Pence Clark's exact words now. "Frum the east rim, 'twas. More damn snakes than the Devil put in Texas, Arizony, Utah, Idaho an' Montany. Indians in there may be old, old-time Hopi. Seems they was adoin' a big snake dance the afternoon I looked down on 'em. I watched 'em only a few minutes, then I kept agoin', scared to hell of 'em even from as fur away as I was. I'd maybe heard too much about Rattlesnake Valley."

Lassiter knew that he was off the old Outlaw Trail now, knew that he had made a slip-up somewhere in the shaky-handed markings on the map. Clark had given it to him only a few days before he died, and one could see from all the blurs and erasures on it, that he had gone to great pains to conceal all the hiding places of wanted men, some of who—Lassiter once heard—had managed to sneak in their wives and children, seeking only to be let alone to the ends of their days. Clark had once mumbled about some valley that had its own school house, its church and general store, wagon and blacksmith shops.

This was no valley like that. This was a valley of crawl-death, a hell-hole peopled by diamond-backed fury and an ancient race of Indians probably as deadly as the ever-growing multitude of snakes themselves.

People were now moving in and out of the houses and down narrow shelves and steps cut into the rock. From the distance it looked as if there were about a hundred of them, and they semed to be old squaws, old men and children. Then, startled by a sudden outburst of sounds, Lassiter swung around a sharp bend to his left, and was all but shocked out of his boots by the sight now in front of him.

A BULGE in the cliffs had kept it hidden. Around it now, he could see another offset in the valley. It was like a giant horseshoe, well-watered along its grassy floor, the walls of cliffs rising stupendously. In them, in a great half-circle, were no less than three hundred houses,

running in places up to eleven stories high and set deeply in the shelves. Below and in front of them was an immense stone platform, made like a pyramid with the top leveled off to a fifty-foot square that was reached by steps in its slanting sides.

On the top steps of the square stood the noise-makers, seventy or eighty of them gaudily feathered and bright-clothed from the shoulders to the thighs. They were handsome young bucks with long, wooden trumpets, reed-pipes and drums, highly polished horns from wild animals, and all kinds of cymbals, and they made a great fanfare of eerie music that filled the horse-shoe and valley from rim to rim.

Some kind of a savage ritual was beginning down there, and Lassiter knew in a second that the weird drumming was what he had sensed during the night. The cliffs had already filled. Scores of bucks, squaws and children lined the shelves and walkways in front of the old stone-and-mud houses, every individual garbed in bright clothing and the same gaudy feathers the musicians were wearing.

Suddenly the music began rising. It pitched on and on, harsher and more weird than ever until it became crashing crescendo.

A procession was coming now, entering the picture with great and solemn dignity.

Men were first, the tallest and broadest in the lead, seven more behind him. Behind those were evidently the pick of young girls, no less than forty forming three-quarters of an oval with its rear closed by scowling young warriors armed with long lances and spears. In the oval, hands bound behind them, bodies bare to the waist, walked a silver-haired white man and a tall, dark-haired girl of nineteen or twenty, their faces grim and white.

Jim Lassiter saw seven more men coming up the steps at the north side of the square, all strong and young, wearing no more than great-feathered head-dresses and flashing loin-cloths. In pairs, six of them walked with stout sticks across their shoulders to support a thirty-foot log looking like a gaudily colored barber's pole. The seventh walked by the end of it to keep it steady. Behind marched girls and squaws carrying large bundles of wood, sticks and twigs wrapped with bright colors.

In a couple of minutes the log was in place, up-ended in a round hole in the center of the platform, the colors around it being let down into long streamers that at once turned it into a giant May-pole. The music still wailed and shrieked as the white man and the girl were marched on. The women and girls with the bundles of wood stood waiting in the background.

Lassiter took his rifle from his saddle. Backing the horse into a little pocket to keep him hidden as long as he could, he wheeled around the bulge to face the scene below again.

THE man and the girl had reached the pole. Strong hands were turning them swiftly, slamming them against the gaudy pole and tying them in place with their backs to it. In a minute more a savage dance was beginning in time to the hellish music, and half-naked figures skipped, hopped and spun around the pole. A great chanting rose from the houses and ledges above the scene as the women came in with their bundles of wood.

Then the men came hopping and skipping in, making an inner circle, knives and bright tomahawks flashing. Lassiter lifted the rifle. When the largest and most gaudy of the lot again flashed in, looking as if he was going to drive his bright tomahawk blade into the white man's skull, Lassiter aimed carefully and touched the hair trigger.

The report of the shot was like a bolt of lightning coming down. It startled everything into a sudden hush, bucks and squaws leaping back, shocked to a standstill, all the music ending. For a moment

there was absolute silence. Then a great crying and screaming burst from every throat.

Long Jim Lassiter could shoot a high-power. His bullet had struck its mark, going through the gaudy buck's chest, staggering him back, blood streaming from his chest and back.

Lassiter fired twice more when he saw two other gaudily-feathered bucks rush toward the white man and the girl, and his lead sprawled them back and down, made others scatter. Then it was like hell itself falling from the rim behind the great platform. Out of the noise of it came a white man's voice.

"Damn it, somebody fired too quick! But give it to 'em now that we're at it, boys! *Give 'em all yo've got!*"

Rifles, old shotguns and six-shooters were flashing on the rim, as more than twenty white men up there poured a rain of death below.

It was pandemonium in a matter of moments, Indians falling back and running wildly, leaving their dead and dying behind them. Lassiter finished killing another redskin up there who managed to stumble to his feet and start a staggering run toward the white man and girl.

Suddenly the Indians were coming back, and now many of them had rifles.

Lassiter was firing again, steadily, trying to make every bullet count, not knowing for a couple of seconds just what was bringing the savages back in such a screaming and howling fury. Then he saw six white men on foot, racing toward the platform as fast as their legs would carry them—a rescue party trying to get to the white man and the girl while the whites above kept up their deadly fire to hold the savages back.

LASSITER kept firing. He emptied the rifle twice, reloading quickly. Out of the corners of his eyes he had seen two of the whites racing toward the platform suddenly stagger and go down, struck by Indan bullets pouring from the doorways of the ancient dwellings.

The four men swept on and up the steps through the ring of firewood. Lassiter saw the blade of a knife flashing in the sunlight as a man cut the captives loose from the pole, letting them drop to their knees. Then, in a matter of seconds, the blade of the knife flashed again. The captives' hands were free now, and the pair were crawling back, the man with the knife helping them.

Lassiter kept shooting, emptying the rifle, reloading. He saw another white man sag at the north lip of the platform. A quick hand grabbed him, helping him down the steps. Now the retreat was on, the firing from the rim hotter and hotter, the yells wilder, Lassiter shooting like a man gone mad. A dead man and a dying man were picked up nothwest of the platform. In a rain of lead, the whites raced staggeringly on, bullets cutting the ground around.

"They're gettin' clear!" The cry was like the blast of a bugle from the rim. "They're amakin' it! Keep apourin' them damn Indians lead! Keep apourin'!"

Suddenly rocks were coming down, a few as large around as the bodies of horses. They struck the ledge below, shattering explosively. Others were smaller, no larger than men's heads, but they added confusion just the same. The dust blinded the savages; the falling stones drove scores of them back to cover in the ancient houses, giving the rescue party a chance to make good their escape somewhere.

Out of shells now, Lassiter leaped to his feet and started back to his horse for another box in his saddle bags. He had gone only a few steps before he was shocked to a halt by a sight in the outer valley where all the rattlesnakes were lying.

Seventy or eighty more Indians were

coming, all afoot and keeping to the rocky little stream. Each was armed with a good rifle and heavy belts of cartridges. On many, slung to them in white man style, were six-shooters.

Turning back around the bulge, Lassiter yelled, hoping his voice would be heard above the hellish noise still going on. "More Indians coming! Down the valley of the rattlesnakes!"

"Get the hell outa there!" bawled back the wild voice of a man who had heard him. "That's a hell of a place to be caught in—whoever yuh are down there! Git fast!"

Lassiter wasted no time. He was in the saddle with a jump, wheeling the bay and making a dash for it, bullets already beginning to cry at him.

CHAPTER TWO

Race for Life

SLAMMING more cartridges in the rifle, Lassiter began firing on the shooting Indians down there in the stream. Almost immediately he could see that he was getting some help from the men on the rim. They were still hurling down stones, still keeping the Indians busy. Some of the whites up there were taking time to open up on the Indians in the stream, shooting so rapidly Lassiter could not tell whose bullets were hitting them, but he kept up his fire.

The bullets were crying from below, slapping the cliffs above him and the running horse. One slapped the saddle horn. Another hit the cantle of the saddle, ripping out a long groove in the leather. As they neared the top, Lassiter felt one bullet graze his shoulder. Almost at the same instant another burned the bay across the hip, a third clipping hair from his tail, stinging him into a faster run.

He reached the top and dropped himself and the horse quickly over beyond it, then hit the ground again with the rifle to crawl back and open fire on the reds in the stream. In a few minutes he heard a white man calling from somewhere above him.

"No use, stranger! More an' more'll only come. There's three damn tribes of 'em in here in a seven or eight-mile circle. They never have nothin' to do with one 'nother unless a fight betwix them an' whites get goin', then they'll all band up. Move on back down the crack."

Feeling that the man above him knew more about this hell-hole than he could ever know, Lassiter was soon back beside the bay. A glance at the animal's burn across the hip told him that it was slight and only oozing a tiny drop of blood here and there. He pitched in the saddle, and rode back down the steep and dangerous trail. At the end of eighty or ninety yards a voice stopped him.

"I can see yuh now, pardner." The man above him had come out on an overhanging rock up there, sixty or seventy feet in the air over the narrow break. "But yuh still can't come up here with a hoss—an' we've got to make tracks for it now. I'm lyin' on my belly. Guess my head's about all yuh can see, but yo're white an' I'm white, an' yuh was fightin' to help us. That means we'll do all we can to help yuh.

"Keep ridin' back, right on an' past the place where yuh camped last night. Yeah, yuh was bein' watched." The face up there, covered with a week's growth of gray beard and shadowed by the floppy brim of a big black hat, twisted into a smile. "Ain't a strange gopher, I reckon, what could come into Four Corners without some Indian or white watchin' 'im all the way.

"But get agoin'." The head and the old hat were already disappearing. "There ain't but little time for talk. We gotta get the hell outa here ourselves. When yuh get to the camp of last night, pass it on by.

Ride for about two miles. Yo'll pass a little waterfall in the crick. Just yonder atter that yo'll come to a place where there's a bunch of pines an' thick brush growin' to yore right. Push right in 'em, an' yuh find yoreself in a regular crack in the rocks.

"It's rough down in that crack, but keep agoin'. By the middle of the atternoon it'll lead yuh into a deep little valley. Stop there in them big trees yo'll find 'round a water hole in the center of it. Don't try goin' on. Sometime tonight or atter mornin' breaks somebody'll get through to yuh. But don't build no big fire, an' see that it's out 'fore dark—an' keep one eye open. If," the head poked out over the overhang of rock again, voice lowering, "the hoot owls holler, don't let 'em scare yuh. We'll try to keep a couple of us close to yuh, but watch the back trail."

He was gone then, giving Lassiter no possible chance to answer him, and the bay was moving on, carefully picking his way, Lassiter watching the rocks on the narrow slope, finding it easier coming down than going up. When they were at the bottom of it they were in the little stream again, twisting and turning with it.

HE WAS going to follow the instructions, hoping that he could make friends in this wilderness of hills and strange places. Other Indians—the few here beside the real savages of Rattlesnake Valley—were usually friendly enough, sometimes allowing a white man to camp overnight in the villages and houses but none wanting him for long, remembering too many old wounds that had come in the past from the white men.

He came to the place where he had camped, and passed it. About two miles beyond it he came to the little waterfall, then the place the man had told him about. The trees and brush looked so formidable even the bay doubted them and had to be spurred and slapped with the ends of the long reins before he would push into them, heading apparently into a solid wall of towering rock.

But there was a crack here, a winding, torturous thing, going up one slope and down another, in places so rough and wild Lassiter had to get down and walk, so narrow now and then he had to flip his stirrups over the saddle to keep them from scraping the rough walls. By the time he was nearing the end of it he was so tired he was ready to drop.

A final bend, a downward pitch, and the valley was ahead of him, almost round, no more than a mile across, no way out of it as far as the eyes could tell in the lengthening shadows cast by the last of the sun pouring over a thousand-foot rim. When he had swung back in the saddle and ridden no more than two hundred yards, he could no longer see the place where he had entered the valley, but the trees and the water hole loomed ahead, just as the man on the rock had said.

Reaching the trees, he immediately piled off the saddle and bridle, and then turned to the water, the bay beside him. Now he had to work rapidly, quickly boiling coffee and frying the last of his small supply of bacon, wolfing it down with a can of cold beans and washing out the fire. By the time he had finished, he heard what sounded like hooting owls high on the rim north of him, and knew that at least one of the white men had followed him.

He knew that he was not to answer the "owl" up there, and he kept to the trees. Later, darkness swiftly closing down, he took his rifle and his blankets and slipped away from the washed out fire, leaving the bay quietly grazing in the deep grass while he found a safe place for himself in the rocks to settle down for the night or until some one came for him.

But no one came as the hours dragged past, and now and then he slept. The bay, like most horses used to traveling long trails with only their masters for

company, was as good as any watch-dog. If a stranger or any animal came within a hundred yards of the camp he would snort and start stamping his feet, warning his master.

Midnight came, two o'clock, three. Toward four, dawn grayed the eastern skyline. He had been awake many times, sitting there in his blankets, listening and watching. The utter quietness of the bay had told him that everything was all right. Now he slept on, longer than he was used to sleeping, and finally rolled out of the blankets when the sun was more than two hours high in the sky. He beat up the last of the flapjack flour and boiled coffee for breakfast.

Then it was wait, and wait, while the sun climbed steadily. Just before noon he heard what sounded like magpies on the rim, but something assured him that the noise was from white men, especially when the low hooting of an owl came down to him.

He was looking westward when he saw a tall sorrel appear out of a seemingly solid wall of rock nearly a half-mile away. He frowned when he saw that the rider was a girl, tall, fair-faced and dark-haired. When she was a hundred yards away, he knew that he had seen her before. "Hello, there!" he called to her.

"GOOD morning, mister!" He saw white teeth flash in a ready smile, and noticed at once that she was heavily armed. Six-shooters were at her hips, a good rifle under her left sweat-leather, a long old shotgun under the right, and a leather bandoleer of cartridges around the correl's neck. "You are the man I'm looking for, I guess!"

"And you," he was telling her a few minutes later, "are the girl I saw about to get killed yesterday!"

"The same," she smiled, "and my thanks to you for the help you gave us in the get-away. I'm Sunday Crow. Yes," she laughed. "Sunday Crow. It usually makes people smile, but that's it—named for the day I was born. The man you saw with me was Dr. William Crow, my father.

"But if you are ready," she glanced anxiously toward the south rim, "we'll get out of here." She pulled up her rifle and laid it across her lap. "You might ride with your rifle handy, too. You never know when trouble will strike these days. But," she glanced at the south rim again, "hurry along. We can talk as we ride."

"You Crows must be remarkable people," he told her when he was ready and swinging in beside her. "Yesterday I saw you and your father about to be burned at a stake, and today you're out, looking none the worse for wear, looking for me because I fired a few shots trying to help you!"

Her smile was grim as she wheeled her sorrel. "You're still not out of trouble, and neither am I. Let's swing apart and ride for it . . . and look out for lead from the south rim. Friends will try to take care of it from the north. Zig-zag as you ride!"

She started fast, both spurs coming into play against the sorrel's flanks, making him lunge forward with a snort. They broke cover. Nothing happened until they were within two hundred yards of the place in the towering wall of rock from where she had come. Then without warning bullets were whistling over and around them as rifles crashed on the south rim.

"Ride!" cried the girl.

The entire valley seemed to burst in rolling gunfire now, crashes sounding on the north rim, yard-long flames of orange-yellow gushing from behind rocks, bullets whining high above them as they drove for targets on the south rim that neither of them could yet see.

Lassiter saw a tall, half-naked figure appear and spin forward on the south a few seconds later. There was a stumbling

fall up there, and an Indian was coming down, dropping a long rifle that trailed through the air behind him.

"And another—and a third!" cried the girl a moment later. "They have a fair sweep at them from the north rim—and every man up there is an expert rifleman! Now maybe we'll make it!"

CHAPTER THREE

God's Pocket

THEY were soon putting the valley behind them, the girl's sorrel making a wild swing to the left that took them behind a shielding wall of rock and into the hidden mouth of another one of those cracks in the tall cliffs looming above them.

Bullets from the south rim had ceased to wail for them before they reached safety. Indians up there had suddenly been too busy to bother with them any more and were triyng to get themselves out of the way of the terrific fusillade from the deadly marksmen across the valley.

As he rode up the narrow passage, Lassiter could only wonder how men had found it in the first place. Then he remembered that most of the people in the Four Corner Country were outlaws or men who had grown sick and tired of the political fee-grabbing, the incessant passing of half-sane laws, the mockery of courts, lawyers, doctors, judges, professional jurymen, and all the rest of it in the outside world where so-called civilization was supposed to rule with such a glorious hand.

Men here had sharp eyes. They found things other eyes would have never seen, and they had to be like that, especially those with rewards on their heads.

The girl kept right on going, and soon they were rounding a great-shouldered bend, and looking down into a mile-deep canyon on a river winding between walls of rock. The girl glanced back and said, "San Juan River."

He nodded soberly. It was too dangerous here for much talk. There was no trail—just another one of those brittle shelves in the face of the chalk-dry cliffs. In places it was covered with rocks and loose shale liable to slip from under the most sure-footed horse's hoofs and slide him and his rider out into space and the river far below.

It was something else an hour later. They were still high above the river when the girl swung to her left, winding into another one of those hellish cracks in the rocks. They made their way down and down until suddenly they emerged into a wide, fertile canyon. The girl pulled up, and turned her sorrel to face him. All signs of friendliness had vanished. Her face was cold and hard.

"Only those with a guide could find this place," she told him. "It is only the beginning. My father and others will be waiting in those trees you see along the creek ahead. They will want to ask you many questions, Mr. Lassiter. Be certain to answer them truthfully. We have methods of always getting the truth out of newcomers.

"Make certain to do as you are told. If it is decided that you are to go on with us, you will wear a blindfold for quite a time. Don't try to take it off no matter how rugged the way may seem to you. There will always be some one close to watch out for you. But if you are to go on your way alone, a way will be pointed out to you. If you balk or try any tricks," there was a faint hint of a cold smile now, "you will be shot down like a mad-dog, and the leavings left for the buzzards. That clear?"

"You hit straight from the shoulder, Sunday Crow!" He was suddenly laughing. "But," he hastily added, "I've always liked things like that. Lead on!

Something tells me I'm going to be run out of here. The same thing tells me I won't be shot."

"And I honestly hope," she nodded, face expressionless, eyes studying him, "that you won't go, and won't get shot. I always hate to see men killed, even those savages yesterday. You may ride beside me now, but for the time, the less talk the better."

"As you say," he agreed. "But," he added with a frown, "I hope it's not always going to be like this."

"It won't—if you're not a spy!"

She was letting the sorrel out into an easy canter now, the bay swinging into it beside him to the left. Not another word was spoken until they were in the edge of the trees and pulling the horses down.

MEN appeared now, and Lassiter was surprised to see that there were only three of them. The silver-haired man he had seen tied to the stake was in the lead, two tall, sober-faced men in rough, home-spun trousers and shirts just behind him, all of them heavily armed, their horses waiting in the background. As Lassiter dropped from the saddle the girl introduced him to her father, for some reason leaving the other two men out of it to keep from mentioning names.

"He already knows who you are, Dad," she told the old man. "He says he's Jim Lassiter, from Texas. That is all I know."

"Howdy, Mr. Lassiter." The doctor thrust out his hand. "Let us hope that we will be glad to welcome you. But first," his sharp blue eyes seemed to harden as they peered into Lassiter's, "we would like to know a little more about you. Before that, however, I want to thank you for what you did for us yesterday."

Lassiter smiled as he released the older hand. "I'm from Texas, as I told your daughter. Ran cattle down there on the rim of the Devil Bend Country, and soon found that I was rustled out of house and home. One night there was a fight while we were trying to save a herd. The next morning we found that we had killed a local deputy sheriff in the shooting. I have newspapers in my saddle pockets, my picture on a couple of them, to bear me out. Some, printed two weeks after the killing, said that stolen horses and cattle from Mexico had been found on my range."

"We'll see the papers, please."

Lassiter handed them to him, then waited while the doctor put on his glasses and slowly scanned them. As soon as he had finished with one paper he passed it to one of the men behind him. When he had finished with the last one and handed it behind him, he looked at Lassiter with a ghost of a smile.

"They say a lot, Mr. Lassiter. Enough—I think—for us to take you before the council. Is there anything else that would help?"

"Only this." Lassiter handed him the rude map the old outlaw had given him. "Some of you might know the man who gave me this. His name was Pence Clark.

"Pence Clark!" The doctor was already staring at the map. "This is something, my friend. Many of us—er—well, we knew Pence. How is he getting along back in civilization these days?"

"He's dead." Lassiter's face was grim for an instant. "I'm the only one down there who really knew anything of his past, and I let that out to no other man. He told me to come here, at least to get through and on to the taller country of Colorado where I have friends."

"Well, fellows," the doctor turned his back to him as he spoke to the silent pair, "I think we'll take him in. Take his guns and blindfold him. That's the rule here." He swung back to Lassiter. "A little harsh, perhaps, to some, but—"

"Your daughter," cut in Lassiter, quietly, "has already told me what to expect. Go ahead with your blindfold."

They wasted neither time nor words here. In a very few minutes Jim Lassiter was back in his saddle, six-shooters shooters slipped from his holsters, a big, black neckerchief placed over his eyes and tied snugly behind his head. The girl spoke, just to his right as they were beginning to move away.

"We'll water the horses downstream. Fear nothing. I am on this side of you. My father's on the left. We'll see to it that the way is always clear in front.

HE COULD trust these people, and had known that he could trust them from the start, ever since the head of the man on the rock had poked itself over the lip to look down and talk to him yesterday. Once they knew he was honest, he would have friends here. Back in Texas, with the dead deputy sheriff having a brother and friends high in politics, he could have expected nothing but the penitentiary. Here these people would stand behind him—the kind of friends a man could rarely make on the outside.

The blindfold was the only trouble. For the first couple of miles after they had stopped to water the horses it made him dizzy, threatening to turn his stomach upside-down, riding in utter darkness, not able to tell which way he was going. But the girl was there to his right, her knee sometimes touching his knee, the same with the doctor on the left.

They made turns and twists. The doctor once ordered him to lean low over his saddle horn. Seconds later he felt light low limbs of pines raking over his back. They went up slopes and down after that, and once were on the bank of a rapid stream with water whistling closely to the left as it spilled down its rocky bed.

"Now we'll take off the blindfold." It must have been three hours after they had started when the girl said that, swinging her horse closer, her hands going up to the black knots at the back of his head. "It was nice to see you come through without complaint. This is God's Pocket."

"God's Pocket!" He sat there blinking in the saddle. It was late in the afternoon and the sun was low on the back of a towering mountain range. Coming from darkness to bright light blinded him momentarily.

"God's Pocket!" He could not help repeating the name. "It looks like it has been rightfully named!"

"Men long before us gave it the name." The doctor chuckled. "No one yet has thought of a better one. It's a little paradise for tired men."

But it was not at all small. It was a deep valley, six or seven miles long from the east to the west, and no less than four miles wide from north to south. A wide creek twisted down the middle of it, great trees along either bank, many more on other little streams working their various ways from the cliffs at either hand to the center of the valley. Sturdy log and stone houses were here and there, small fields in front of them. In the distance, half-way down the valley were a cluster of buildings, among them a church, a school house, a general store, and a blacksmith shop with dark smoke coming from a hood on its low, wide-spreading roof.

"It's nice." The girl spoke. "As safe, the first people here said, as being in God's Pocket. Warm enough in winter, cool nights in summer. Each of us grows almost everything we need. Not one of us would trade our share of it for anything on the outside."

"Nor twice that!" heartily agreed the doctor. "Very few of us were ever able to boast of real happiness until we came here!"

THE more he saw of it, the better he liked it. One could not help it. Here was a country all of its own. It would have no politicians, no fee-grabbers, land-hogs and the rest of the money-snatching public parasites found choking everything to death outside. Law as Lassiter was to later learn would be simple here and easy to follow, the same for one man as another, no howling and wailing in the courts, breakers of the rules given fair and impartial hearings on the porch of the general store. Even those who were fined for overstepping the bounds could not complain about it.

Everybody here had everything they needed. Only certain supplies had to be slipped in by pack-mules along dangerous trails known only to a few and watched with ever-alert eyes. Grain and vegetables were grown at every hand. Weaving was done in many of the cabins and houses. A tan-yard on a bench of the cliffs gave them leather, the blacksmith supplied everything in the way of iron and steel, and most of the men were fair gunsmiths. A few wild cattle had been caught and tamed, giving milk and butter for the old as well as the young, and down behind the store was a grist mill to grind the grain.

"Here is our house." Crow was finally pulling up in front of a big log cabin at the east end of the village. "My office, drugs, a simple operating room. Sunday acts the nurse in tough cases. You'll stay with us, making yourself at home until your case is decided. I'm certain that I don't need to tell you, but we have a 'must' here for all newcomers. We must tell them the same thing: Don't try to leave on your own hook. You would never get out of the valley—alive. Here are your six-shooters," he smiled broadly, "just in case you want to try. Now we'll put up the horses, and Sunday'll knock together something to eat."

"And that," Lassiter was grinning from ear to ear by this time, "is the best thing you've said so far! I think I could go an alligator or at least a wild-cat right now."

By sundown he felt that he belonged here, and had been here a long time. There were many things he wanted to know, but a man in an outlaw hideaway did not ask questions. At a supper table laden with venison, hot bread and vegetables, Doc Crow finally spoke of the Indians, making it a point to avoid all else.

"No one knows what they are," he frowned. "They do not all look the same. Some say there are three tribes, some say four. No one can be certain. Even in their seven or eight-mile circle they have very, very little to do with each other. They have absolutely nothing to do with other Indians living in the Four Corner Country, and none of the peaceful ones will have anything to do with them. I know, because I've done quite a bit of work among the peaceful reds who live nearby.

"I was on a call to friendly Indians with Sunday three days ago when we were captured on the rim of those heathen holes. A friendly Indian watching us to see that no harm came brought the news on here, and you see what happened—with help from you. Some day we'll probably have to wipe them out. If we do every other Indian in the Four Corners is apt to pitch in and help. It may surprise you to know that those ancient cliff dwellings are no more than twenty miles from us by foot-travel."

"Twenty miles!" Lassiter's eyes widened. "But—but—"

"You were a long, long time getting here!" cut in the girl with a laugh. "That was to save your horse for you. A horse here is a priceless thing. Without one you are as good as lost."

"And we breed very few here so far." Doc Crow was reaching for another slice

of venison. "Our valley is not large enough for general breeding. Nobody here suffers from want, but many have not owned a horse in years. A mule or a burrow can do most of the plowing, and some really have no need for a horse—not wanting to leave the valley at any time. Actually, Lassiter, we do not have a bad man in the valley, and wouldn't tolerate one. No bullying, no quarreling or fighting."

"Then," cried Lassiter, dropping a fork, "you have an Eden here!"

"Snakes, yes!" Crow grinned from ear to ear now. "But no Eves. We are just as we say, in God's Pocket, safe and sound, envying no man in his 'civilized world' outside.

"But," he laughed, taking an old-fashioned gold watch from his pocket to look at it, "I must be going. I'll not be too long. Maybe I'll return your newspapers and your map when I get back. On the other hand you may not get them for a day or two—several days, possibly, if others find anything to doubt."

"To the council now," explained the girl when he was gone. "It always meets as quickly as possible when strangers come."

"And," ventured Lassiter, "I suppose it'll be tough?"

"Tough, yes," she agreed with a nod, "but as fair as they can be. We really want newcomers. There's still another valley almost like this adjoining us through a pass to the south east—but wait now!" She was suddenly catching herself. "We do not talk of such things until a newcomer is passed upon, and usually not freely until he's gone through a period of—er—well," she smiled, "let us call it probation, a period to test one's character to see whether he actually wants to stay or we went him to stay. Please take another cup of coffee, and I'll bring a jar of cookies."

"Cookies for a Texas outlaw!" He laughed outright now. "Good for you, Sunday Crow! Do you know something, something that keeps coming to me plainer and plainer?"

"How could I know!"

"Well, I'll tell you. I'm beginning to be glad I got in trouble in Texas!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Yearlings

HE WAS in bed long before the doctor returned, having been shown a small but comfortable room in the west end of the house. It was a good, deep bed, something he had not felt under him in what had seemed months. As if he had been here always and didn't have a care in the world, he was asleep in a very few minutes. It was unbroken this time. Birds were chirping happily just outside his window when he opened his eyes and saw that dawn was at hand, half the people of the valley already up, but the doctor and the girl still sleeping soundly.

The first thought as always was his horse. Dressing quickly, he stepped out a side door and made his way to the stables to feed the girl's sorrel, his bay, and the doctor's long old iron-gray. By the time he had finished with that, life was beginning to stir in the house. He entered at the kitchen door, and at once started a fire in the stove, putting on a kettle of water.

When he stepped back outside and started washing his face and hands on the small rear porch he saw a pack-train of eleven mules moving down the valley to westward. He was drying himself on a towel when the doctor came out.

"It may take several days yet," Crow was soon telling him, "but you'll just have to be patient about it. There's nothing else to do."

"Then," Lassiter looked at him closely,

"there was some hitch, some doubt?"

"Not doubt." Crow moved on to the wash-basin. "Mere caution, let's say. Good for you in the end as well as the rest of us. It's no harm to tell you that newspapers are not always reliable. We saw newspapers in here before, and were almost trapped. They were faked, Jim."

"Faked!"

"Easily!" Crow smiled, grimly. "An old, old thing, I've been told. A smart sheriff can make a deal with some weekly newspaper editor. Sections of type can be removed from the bed of his press and filled in with other type and a picture. He can print a few of those, then go back to his honest edition. Many people believe everything they see in print—and as I said, we were almost trapped by a deputy sheriff from Utah and a federal agent from Denver. The least said about it, the better. We are not fond of questions here as you know. Just wait."

The breakfast was quiet but nice. Lassiter offered to help with the dishes, the coffee pot and the pans. The girl would have none of it, and with the doctor soon leaving on a call to make a round of the few on his sick-list, Lassiter took himself off to the backyard to tackle a pile of logs with a one-man crosscut saw and an axe.

He sawed and split stove wood until noon, racking it in shining new stacks to dry. There was more food at noon but little talk about God's Pocket, and not yet the mentioning of a single name of any of the other people here.

The afternoon passed like the morning, and by sunset the last bit of wood had been cut to the proper length for the stove. After it was split in the morning, he would give his attention to longer and heavier wood for the fireplaces, stacking it for the gray winter days.

"It's the first time," grinned Crow at the supper table, "that I've ever seen wood cut in time around my house. Yet once, when I was interested in a bank, I wouldn't make a loan without going out to see if the farmer or a rancher had wood stacked up. If he didn't I'd never make him a loan, knowing I was improvident. I never was wrong about it."

"Wood-cutting gets me back in trim!" Lassiter joked. "Hardens the muscles, puts strength in the back!"

"As if you look like a convalescent!" It was the girl's turn to laugh now. "But go to it. I'll show you the place where more can be cut, then we'll get a wagon and haul it in."

"Look out!" chuckled the doctor. "She's out now to make a work-horse out of you. When she goes for wood with me I put another smaller handle on the end of the saw, and make her pull."

"And then," nodded the girl, softly laughing again, "you almost immediately think of somebody who must have a couple of pills, and off you go on a mission of mercy, leaving me with the entire saw or sending someone else back to pull your end. He's a grand old fake at getting out of work, Jim, but," she shrugged slightly, "I have to love him. After all, a girl never has but one father!"

It was nice banter, bringing laughs and keeping them away from the subjects that might concern the valley. When Lassiter went back to the wood next morning after another perfect night of sleep and a big breakfast he was whistling a tune, keeping it up for the most of the day, the wood piles and racks growing and growing until the last of the splitting was done an hour before sundown.

WHEN morning came again he saddled up the horses and rode with the girl to a nearby little forest on the north side of the valley, and now he rode without a rifle or six-shooters, happy at the thought of hanging them on the wall in his room and forgetting about them. He carried the saw, the girl a couple of axes,

and another day was spent in the business of getting wood—Lassiter, glad that the work allowed him to keep close to this tall, pretty girl.

"You never did tell me," he was finally venturing, "why you came to meet me in that valley, all by yourself."

"Men were needed on the high places, Jim. Besides, I knew the way. I know most of these trails better than any man here. Indians needing father's services now and then have taken us over some that no one else knew existed. So I was the logical one to go for you while the others kept to the high places to cover us both."

"And that explains it perfectly," he nodded. "Now that you've gone that far, Sunday, tell me how they'll know whether I'm a fraud or not—will you, please?"

"You're not much of an outlaw, Jim, or you'd know," she smiled. "A pack-train left the next morning. It'll be back in here soon. A certain man in that train knows certain friends down in your country, and there's a telegraph office where they're going for our outside supplies. He'll know the truth when he comes back. Don't ask me any more questions, please. We like you, and hope for the best."

"Then you'll go on liking me," he nodded, "when you know the truth!"

"I'll be glad," she said simply.

She pointed out the marked trees that could be cut, and he did the chopping and sawing, downing a dozen before she stopped him. When it came to cutting off the limbs and tops she joined him in spite of his protests, swinging her lighter axe expertly.

"Here's the sandwiches for lunch," she told him at noon, untying an Indian basket from behind the cantle of her saddle. "Today Dad will have to shift for himself—and won't. Somebody will willingly feed him!"

The rest of the day passed. When the sun was setting they headed homeward, just as if it had always been like this. He fed the horses, then hurried on to the house to find that she had already started a fire in the stove, and would have no more of him in the kitchen until supper was ready. After that, the doctor again with them, he was looking forward to that deep, soft bed again, but it was a night that he would not sleep peacefully through this time.

Distant shots and far-away yells rolled him out of bed a couple of hours before dawn. Once in his clothing and boots, he hit for the outside, knowing that the doctor and the girl were coming. He joined them behind the house when they came hurrying out of the kitchen, Crow half-dressed and still trying to yank up his suspenders.

"What is it!" cried the girl. "It sounds all around us!"

"Guns!" Lassiter pointed to the south. "Look at the flashes! And look this way!" He was pointing eastward now. "There's more flashes in that direction."

"And look at the west!" yelled the doctor. "There's a house or a barn afire! Must be John Grover's place!"

"Dad, it's Indians!" cried the girl. "They're striking us from all sides! They must be lowering themselves into the valley on long grass-ropes. Look at the flashing of guns behind Dutton's!"

Indians! Indians!" The crying seemed to boil skyward in all directions now. "The ones from the old cliff dwellings!"

"We killed their chief!" cried another voice, closer at hand. "They ain't the kind to forget that! Grab yore guns, ever'body! Guns! *Guns!* They're pourin' in on us like hell's yearlin's!"

IT WAS red hell in a very few moments. Attacking from four sides, on long ropes just as Sunday Crow had guessed, the Indians were bent on a wipe-out.

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everywhere. The burning of barns had been a huge mistake on the part of the Indians. The light brought them into view up there like ants on long strings, and rifle after rifle was pulling them off the string. Muzzle-loader shotguns packed with enormous charges of the heaviest buckshot poured a whistling, killing rain into the fight, and the thundering, crashing and drumming of the firing filled the valley from rim to rim.

Everybody near the center of the valley raced wildly for the nearest stables, snatching out horses, taking no time to saddle them but leaping to their bare backs, handling them with halter-shanks and digging heels, weapons up and ready.

Jim Lassiter had already taken down his six-shooters and rifle, and had headed for the stables. Before he could get the bay out, the doctor and the girl were there, the girl with a rifle and a shotgun, her six-shooters back at her hips. Doc Crow looked like an arsenal, guns of all descriptions appearing to cover him.

They swung northward, joining a galloping line of riders, some mounted on mules and burros, terrified livestock escaped from the barns running with them. They made a sweep to eastward, where the heaviest fighting was.

The running line of horses, mares, mules and burros kept on, wounded men still riding, still fighting, not the kind to quit until a bullet laid them down.

Jim Lassiter ran out of cartridges for his rifle before he could reach the south side. Now he swept closer, opening up with his six-shooters, conscious of a shotgun roaring bloody murder behind him in spasmodic intervals. When he had gone on to reach a bare place where no Indians were showing above them, he saw that Sunday Crow was shooting that shotgun, her father right behind her, blazing away.

"I'm out of shells for my rifle!" Lassiter yelled at them.

"Here are two boxes!" screamed the girl, taking them from a pocket of her saddle.

They completed the run after that, having to slow the line down to keep horses from running themselves down and falling from under them. The Indians had had the worst of it. Those who could, were turning back like monkeys on the long lines, some of them falling, knocking others off the lines below them to break their bones on the rocks beneath. By the first light of dawn only the dead, the dying and the sorely wounded were left behind, some of the latter having to be killed off to stop them from carrying on the fight with the last of their waning strength.

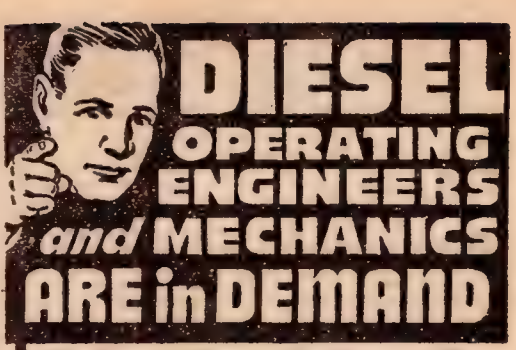
"Whipped 'em!" yelled Crow. "What damned fools they were to think they could fight us on our own ground!"

"Lis'en, ever'body! Them's more guns in the distance!"

By the first hint of sunlight the entire valley was a stirring, buzzing hornet-nest. Doc Crow seemed to have more weight with them than anybody else. He had attended their sick and their dying, and had brought many of the children born here into the world. But it was all that the doctor could do to make half of them remain in the valley to ward off a surprise attack that might fall on them with so many leaving.

Now, the sun showing on a distant mountain rim, they rode as far as they could, the girl and the doctor pointing out the way to Lassiter, the others following. They went up trails that were not trails at all, making dangerous bends and turns, getting higher and higher until it was impossible for their mounts to carry them any further. Every animal was then turned back, a man ordered to lead the way for the long line, another bringing up the rear.

Even the going on foot was rough now,



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the men pouring perspiration as they climbed over one obstacle after another. Sunday Crow and Lassiter seemed to take it easier than the others, the girl even better than Lassiter. Doc Crow kept close, puffing and blowing like an old and winded horse.

There were six fast, short fights in the first seven miles of it, when some hidden redskin gave away the hiding place by having a nervous trigger-finger that would not let him wait. Each time the Indians were thrown back, running and yelling.

By noon the line of whites was getting close to the high rim above the ancient houses. Lassiter stopped and pointed toward a dense thicket of pines to their right and below them.

"Fire's the only way." Lassiter whispered. "With enough of it we can drive them out of the houses, but it'll have to be fast, once we start it—and the job's tough."

They were soon at it, struggling, sweating and whisper-cursing here and there, working in crowds to break down dead trees or uproot them. Others were tearing off limbs and scraping up great piles of dead pine needles. A staggering line started dragging them to the rim. When the pile was getting high, a wild burst of shooting broke out on the curving rim just above Rattlesnake Valley where the hot sun now kept the reptiles in their holes.

Returning the fire rapidly, everybody dropping work to take part in it, the fight was soon hot, then roaring, filled with a savage screaming and crying, wails of squaws beginning to lift from the old houses below. None of the fighting whites realized just what was happening for a few moments, then Doc Crow was yelling.

"Friendly Indians are helping us, men! Watch these damned savages fall back! They're licked! Watch 'em go!"

Indians from the old houses were trying to make a break for it. They had only one direction to go with any safety at all. That was right down into Rattlesnake Valley.

"Look!" Somebody yelled. "There's a cloud blanketin' out the sun! Even the sun's with us! The clouds are bringin' the rattlers out!"

"It's the end of it from now on!" cried Lassiter when the rain really began to fall. "We've smoked and burned out the last of them. The squaws and children are trying to keep to the stream between the rattlesnakes. Maybe they'll get away."

"Lis'en!" bawled another voice. "There's heavy firin' in the distance! Other Indians are hittin' them other holes an' ol' houses! This is the end of the heathen savages! Damnit, them other redskins ain't gonna have no mercy!"

"They've never shown it to any one else!" cried Doc Crow. Suddenly he turned to Lassiter and thrust out his hand. "Let me tell you something, Jim. Wanted to tell you long before now, but there was too much excitement. A man from that pack-train got back before we left the valley. It would have made no difference if he hadn't. You've won your right to stay in the valley. You're one of us as long as you wish to stay, to follow our rules and be as one of us. You—"

"Oh, Dad!" cried the girl, "why didn't you tell me before now!"

"Damn it, Sunday, how can a man think with Indians on his brain!"

They were turning back right after that, a long, tired string of silent men, the bodies of two of their dead being carried, four wounded in the lot and having to be helped along.

Jim Lassiter could think of Doc Crow's words. Beside him, her step light, was Sunday Crow. Before they had gone a thousand yards he was holding her hand.

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(Continued from page 49)

et, the yearling hot on his heels, when suddenly, a half a rod from a fence of leaning windfalls, Old Snag suddenly wheeled.

There was no halting the young one. In his panic he called on his last ounce of reserve strength and lifted himself over the fence. There was a loud crash of breaking brush as the yearling smashed through the light covering of the trap.

Now the dog, on its haunches, raised her head and howled a high-pitched series of cries.

Old Rimrock Ewing came pounding through the brush, his heart thumping with elation. Rimrock was sure of his victory! That female hound, Sue, didn't give tongue like this otherwise.

Shortly, Rimrock halted at the edge of the thicket to hitch his trail pack up higher and bite off a fresh cud of tobacco. He chuckled as he filled his cheek.

"So you thought you could everlastin best me, huh, Ol' Snag?" he said to himself. "Ain't never been a wild critter yet could outwit Rimrock Ewing." With visions of a famous, handsome set of antlers above his mantel, Rimrock parted brush and strode on. He glimpsed his dog and called softly to her.

"Good gal, Sue," he said. "You done a great job, but I wonder what's happened to Dan, your mate!"

Rimrock moved in closer to the edge of the pit. He quivered with excitement as he craned his neck, then suddenly his eyes bugged. He almost swallowed his tobacco as he gulped hard. That creature in the pit bottom was a mangy, good-for-nothing long-yearling buck which would not even make the best coyote bait!

The old nester was still bellowing his curses when suddenly he froze. A horse was stomping through the brush.

"Paul—Maguire!" he gasped.

"Caught up with you at last, huh, Rimrock?" the tall young ranger sang out,

pulling his horse to a halt. "You can't augur your way out of this one. I found your other dog quarter of a mile back—badly stomped. Had to tap him on the head—put him out of his misery. Seems like he got too close to the hoofs of Old Snag. Okay, call in your bitch hound an' hightail it. I'll be calling on you later. One day you'll learn it pays to hunt legal."

Maguire wheeled and rode off.

IT WAS the sharp snort of his horse which later caused the ranger to wheel in the saddle and glance sharply up.

A slow smile gathered up his mouth corners as he swung his binocular to focus on the handsome, statue-like form of Old Snag up on the small plateau. The big buck's sides still heaved from his exertion, but his head was held proudly high.

No one in all the range knew this big buck better than did Paul Maguire. The ranger had watched him develop from a pugnacious spike buck to become the king of the hinterland.

Suddenly the man frowned and shook his head slowly. He had another quick job to do. Although that specimen party had a legal permit, Maguire intended to intercept them, to intercede in Old Snag's behalf.

For a brief moment Maguire had taken his glasses off the buck. When he lifted them again, Old Snag had vanished.

The big buck minced delicately along a leaf mould path into a thicket of tender second growth wild fruit shrubbery, there to begin snipping off the succulent buds and twigs, grunting in contentment.

His hunger appeased, he moved into the cool depths of a small timber belt where, after searching the wind, he dropped to rest, his lower jaw wagging, his nose twitching before at last his eyes closed and he stretched out to sleep in comfort and peace.

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(Continued from page 73)

Hank came down right square in the middle of the creek. The three men behind him were a bit luckier. All of their horses pitched and cavorted, but, by grabbing leather, they managed to stay aboard.

But Ma didn't see any of this. She was too busy hanging on. When the cannon went off, the recoil from the overload of blasting powder jerked it part-way around and it took off backwards down the grade toward the creek at a mile a minute.

The trail, the part in back of the cannon that is meant to be buried in the ground to hold it down when fired, scooped Ma up like a giant spoon would, and took her right along.

Hank Dinbro came to the surface and had his mouth open to grab a badly needed lungful of air just as Ma and the juggernauting cannon tore through the willows and sailed out over head. Hank didn't have much time to think about this rather unusual sight, though, because Ma lost her hold on the cannon and fell right smack on top of him."

The three rannys who had been with Hank finally ran out of scaredness and came back. They found Ma, wet and bruised, sitting on the edge of the bridge, Hank was there, too, looking badly waterlogged and much the worse for wear. But when the three men saw what was going on, they turned around and tiptoed away.

The reason was, Hank was stretched out flat, his head on Ma's lap, and he was looking up at her like he'd suddenly found something he needed awfully bad.

He was saying kind of jerky-like, ". . . and I got to thinkin' while I was layin' there on the sofy all hog-tied up, that . . . well any woman who'd do whut you done for me, musta kinda . . . well, like me, sorta. An' . . . well, I got to thinkin' some more, an' I thought . . . well . . ."

Hank's face turned red. ". . . uh, anyway, I finally got so gol danged mad at

myself I jest busted right out a that rope you strung me in. An' I hightailed it for town. I knew a couple, three a the boys were achin' to take a crack at that skunk, Joad Murdock, but like me, they kinda lacked the nerve. I figgered mebbe I could get 'em riled to the p'int where they'd be willin' to foller me an', between the mess of us, we mebbe could—"

"What," Ma asked softly, her eyes looking like velvet diamonds, "was it ye was thinkin' about afore ye busted oot a the ropes? Ye forgot to say."

Hank's adam's apple bobbled. "Aw . . ."

"Yeah?" Ma prompted.

"Aw . . . well, gol dang it, I was thinkin' how much I loved you."

"Oh . . . losh!" Ma squealed, grabbing an armful of Hank and squeezing so hard it's a wonder she didn't break him.

Then, all of a sudden, she let go, jumped to her feet and tore off up toward the house. Hank groaned a couple of times, got a lungful of new wind, then got up and ran after her, wondering if maybe she'd sprung her head some in that ride.

Ma was sitting on the edge of her bed when he came panting into her room. The bagpipe was under her arm, the air-tube in her mouth and great, biscuit-like tears flooding down her cheeks.

Hank pulled up to a skidding stop, looked down at her wide-eyed. "Whut," he asked, deeply puzzled, "In dangnation's wrong now?"

Ma shook her head, and the tears flew.

"I'm sooo hoppy!" she croaked, then made a toothy grab for the bagpipe mouthpiece again. She closed her eyes and swayed slightly as her big arm whammed down on the airbag.

"Eeeyyyoooee!" the tortured bagpipe complained.

Hank closed his hands over his ears. "Ohh . . . my gawd all Avery!" he moaned, heading for the barn.

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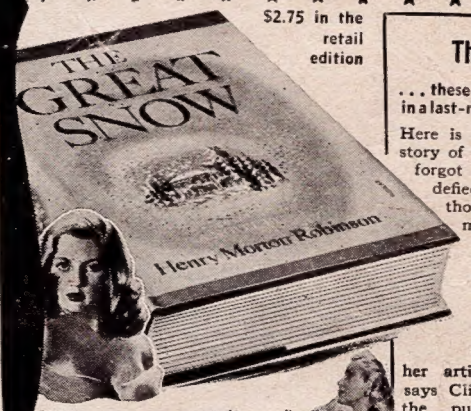

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